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Short Stories

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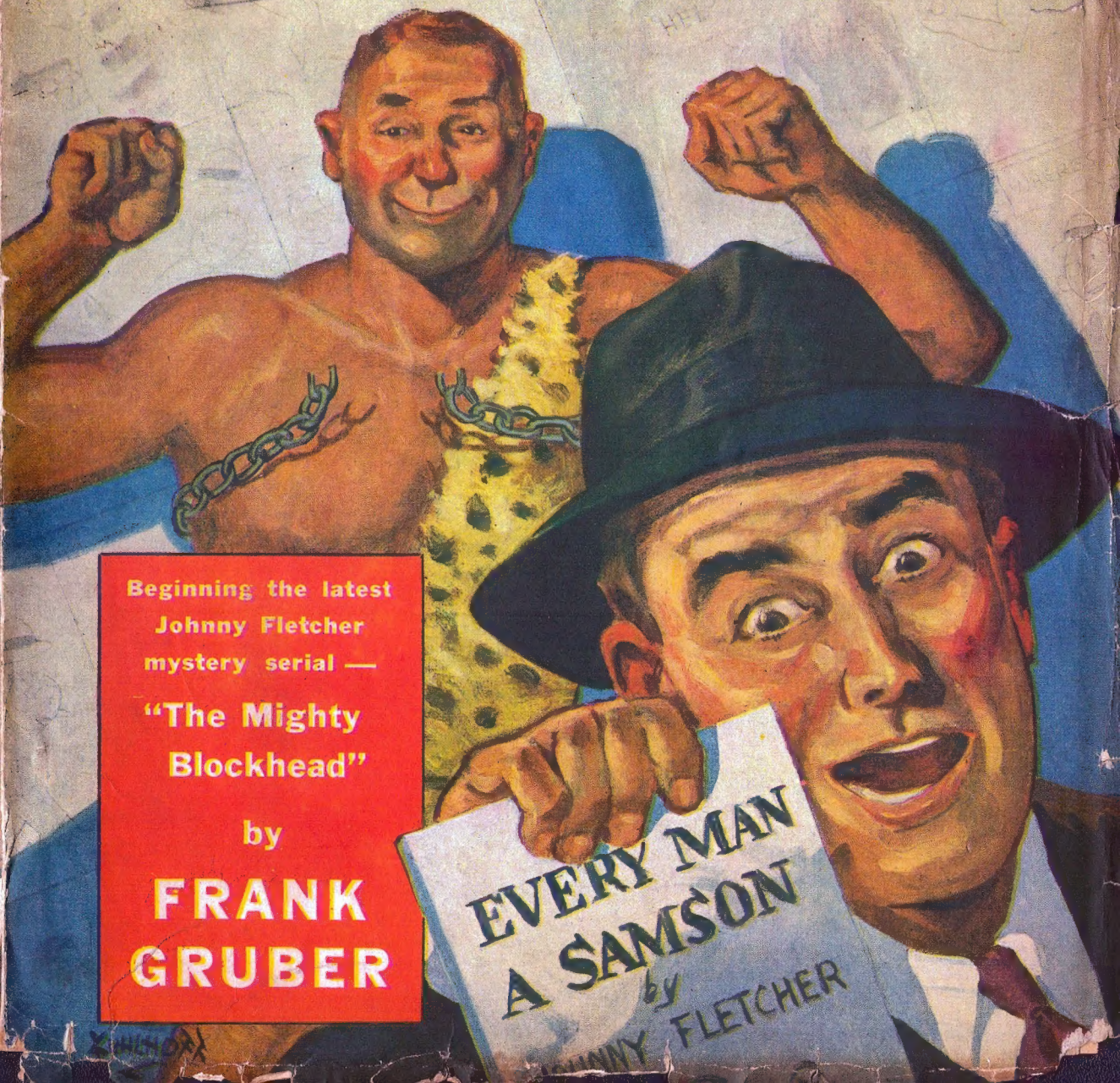

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"The Mighty Blockhead"

by

FRANK GRUBER

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Stories

latest stories—no reprints

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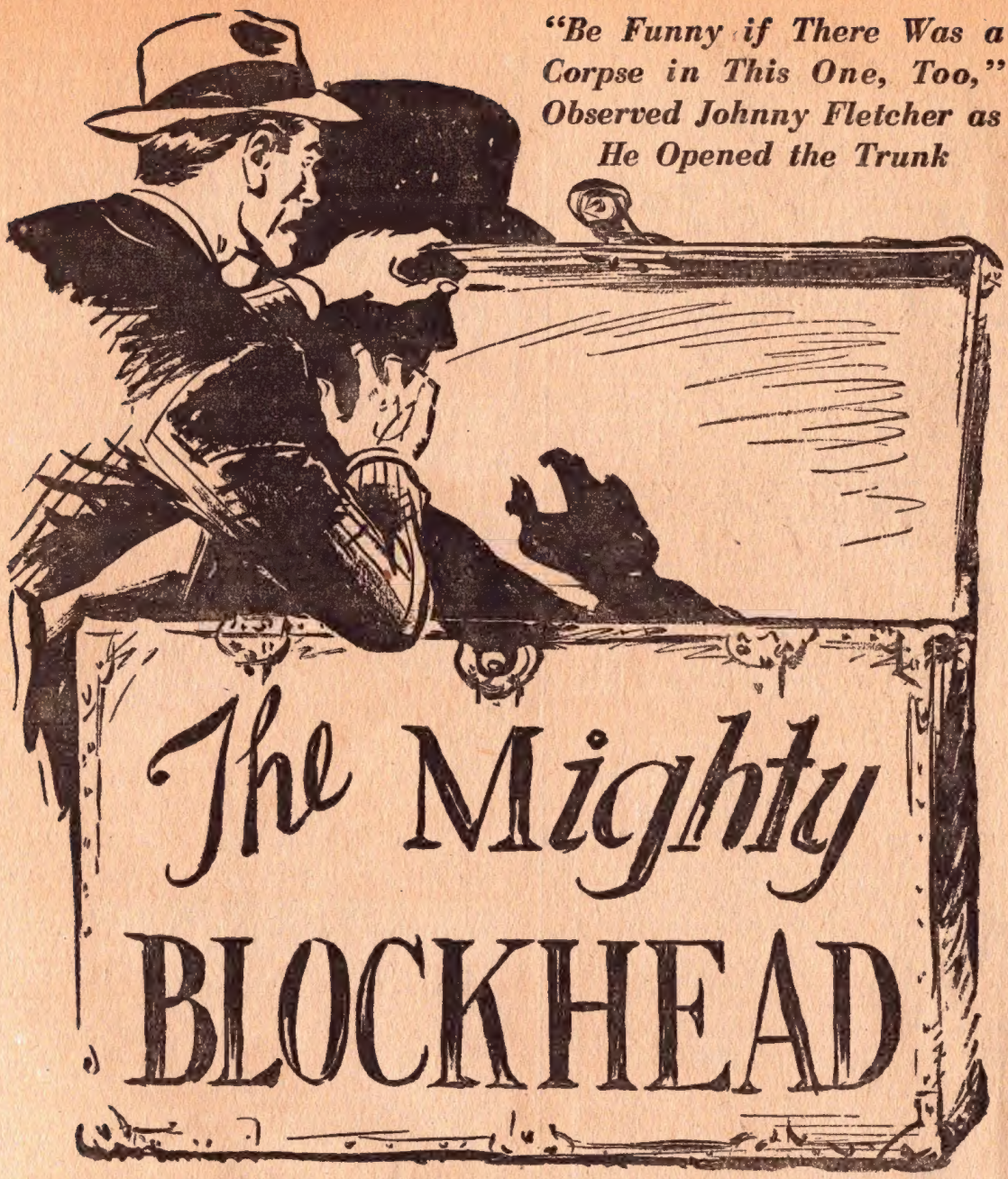

"Be Funny if There Was a Corpse in This One, Too," Observed Johnny Fletcher as He Opened the Trunk

The Mighty BLOCKHEAD

I

JOHNNY FLETCHER had the key in his hand, but it wasn't necessary to put it in the lock, for the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and said over his shoulder:

"This mousetrap gets crummier right along. The maids don't even bother to lock the rooms anymore, after cleaning up."

Sam Cragg grunted as he followed Johnny Fletcher into the room. "If you worked oftener we wouldn't have to stay at dumps like this." He took off his coat and throwing it on one of the twin beds, plumped himself down into an armchair. It creaked under his 200 pounds. "At that, we're in better condition than we usually are when we get to New York. We've got eight dollars between us and a bunch of books—"

"And a trunk!" Johnny nodded toward the black, rivet-studded trunk that stood in one corner of the room. He grinned. "That was one of my more brilliant ideas,

PART I

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of "The Navy Colt" and Other Mystery Novels of Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg

Sam. You go into a hotel with a couple of paper cartons, containing books and they don't consider that baggage, so they ask for the room rent in advance. But you put the same books into a trunk and they give you a nice, pleasant smile. A man who owns a trunk is a substantial citizen. And it only cost us six dollars, second-hand."

"Trunk or no trunk," said Sam Cragg, "if Peabody'd been on the job today, I don't think he'd let us have this room without laying it on the line."

Johnny Fletcher chuckled. "Maybe we'd better get a handful of money. It'll disappoint him no end if we're able to pay. Break out some books and we'll take a look-see around Times Square."

Sam Cragg got up and went to the trunk. He lifted the lid and uttered a cry of horror.

"Johnny, for Cripes sake!"

He let the trunk lid bang down.

Johnny Fletcher took a quick step toward Sam Cragg, then stopped as he caught the full significance of his friend's distorted, shocked face.

"What—what's in the trunk?"

"A dead man!"

"What?"

Johnny reached past Sam, gripped the trunk lid and jerked it up. He looked down into the trunk, holding onto the lid and it seemed to him that all the strength flowed from his lean body to the floor.

Sam Cragg jostled him and Johnny felt the shudder that shook Sam.

"Gee!"

Gently, Johnny let down the lid. Then he turned to Sam, his nostrils flaring.

"What became of the books?"

"Eh? What?"

"The books aren't in the trunk; where are they?" Johnny tried to answer the question himself by dropping to the floor and shooting a swift look under the beds and the cheap chiffonier. Then he got up and strode to the clothes closet.

He looked inside and whistled softly. Then he whirled and gave Sam a startled look.

"The clothes in the closet they don't belong to us. And the trunk," he darted a scrutinizing glance at it, "it isn't ours!"

Sam Cragg lumbered forward. "Holy Cow! It ain't!"

"Of course not. It's the same size and style as ours, but it's newer. I should have noticed that before, but—" Johnny inhaled suddenly and rushed to the door. He jerked it open, swung it shut and came back to Sam.

Consternation was spread over his face. "We're in the wrong room, Sam!"

"What!" How could we?"

"This is *seven* twenty-one. Our room is eight twenty-one. Cripes, the rooms are

the same. The elevator operator made a mistake and let us off on the seventh floor and we didn't notice. The door was open and I didn't have to use the key. And neither of us thought to look at the number on the—"

"What're we waiting for?" cried Sam Cragg. "Come on!"

But Johnny Fletcher beat him to the door and held him back a moment, while he listened. Not hearing any sound in the corridor he opened the door cautiously. He stuck out his head, then stepped out.

Sam closed the door quietly and followed Johnny. The staircase was beside the elevator, some twenty feet from Room 721.

Johnny had reached it and was taking the first step up the carpeted flight, when he heard a door slam somewhere on the seventh floor. He jerked about to hurry Sam, but it was an unnecessary movement. Sam hurtled past him, taking three stairs in one jump.

TEN seconds later they both reached the eighth floor level and Johnny unlocked Room 821 with the room key. His eyes went instantly to the black trunk in the corner and he felt better when he saw it. But he was not satisfied completely until he had raised the lid and found the trunk filled with books.

Sam, looking over Johnny's shoulder shuddered in relief. "Gee, what a narrow escape!"

"Escape, Sam?"

"Yeah, sure. Imagine if the stiff'd been in *our* trunk and *our* room. What would we have done with it?"

"I don't know. That was the first time I ever found a dead man in a trunk, a murdered man."

"Murdered? What . . . how do you know he was murdered?" Sam looked a little sick.

"The left side of his head was all bashed in."

Sam groaned. "Don't, Johnny! It's bad enough just thinking about it. Gee, what I'd give for a drink!"

Johnny brightened. "*That's* what *I* need! Come on, what're we waiting for?"

Johnny locked the door behind them, then pressed the button for the elevator. It came after a moment and as the door opened, Johnny nudged Sam cautiously.

As the elevator dropped to the lobby floor, Johnny whistled a few bars of *Silver Threads Among the Gold.* He winked at the elevator operator as he stepped out to the lobby. "Great song!"

Without looking toward the desk, Johnny and Sam left the hotel. On the sidewalk, they turned left toward Seventh Avenue. A half block up the street was Dinky Maguire's Pretzel Parlor.

They went in. There was sawdust on the floor and a long bar stretching down the length of the narrow room. The bar was being held up by a solid line of afternoon customers. Halfway down the room, a pasty-faced youth with a cigarette pasted to his lips, was pounding a midget piano. A blowzy blonde was holding up the midget piano and wailing something about: "This little piggy went to market."

Johnny saw a small opening at the bar and attacked it. He was having poor luck widening the salient, until Sam Cragg threw his burly, muscular body into the breach and with a shove or two made room for both himself and Johnny.

"Two beers," Johnny said to the bartender.

"Beer?" Sam scowled. "I thought we were going to have a drink."

"You know what happened the last time you had anything stronger than beer? Excuse me."

The last to a man on his left who was about four drinks beyond his quota. He waved an old fashioned so that it sloshed over his hand. "I said to quit shovin'. I don't like to be shoved aroun', see."

Sam Cragg grinned pleasantly past Johnny. "Nobody's shoving you around, buddy."

"The hell they ain't. I'm sick and tired of bein' shoved aroun' and the next guy that tries it is goin' to get a smack in the kisser, see?"

A man on the far side of the inebriated one tugged at his elbow. "Cut it out, Ken, nobody's shoving you."

Ken brushed off the hand on his elbow and took a swing at Johnny Fletcher, which missed by a foot and grazed Sam Cragg's shoulder. Sam grabbed Ken's wrist and brought it down.

The drunk swung with his other hand. Sam rolled his head and caught the second wrist. He put it with the first and held both with one hand.

"Naughty, naughty," he chided.

"Leggo," howled Ken. "Leggo, or I'll knock your head off."

"Knock ahead," Sam invited cheerfully. He leaned carelessly against the bar, the while he held the struggling drunk's wrists with his one hand.

By this time the scuffle had attracted the attention of almost everyone along the bar and they were crowding around so thick the official tavern bouncer had a hard time breaking through the ring. But he finally succeeded.

"Hey," he exclaimed. "Cut it out."

The drunk's friend was hopping up and down, trying to get at Sam Cragg to rescue Ken, but Johnny Fletcher blocked him successfully. Now Johnny sidestepped to face the bouncer, who was holding his right hand behind his back. This to Johnny's experienced eye indicated either a blackjack or brass knuckles. "We didn't start this," Johnny said, "but if you butt in someone's going to get hurt."

"Sure," said the bouncer. "You!" He brought out his hand. There was a set of brass knuckles on the fist.

Sam Cragg pushed Ken, the drunk, so violently against the bouncer that the latter went down backwards, the drunk on top of him. Sam stooped and catching the bouncer's hand stripped the brass from it. Then he jerked the bouncer to his feet and slapped him with his open palm. The man's head rocked and his knees buckled. Sam let him fall.

"Gee!" said the friend of the drunk. "Blockhead, the strong man."

"What'd you call me?" Sam snapped.

"Blockhead—"

"Blockhead! You want some of what I gave this guy?"

The man backed away. "No, no. I didn't mean that as an insult. I—you know, Blockhead, the famous comic character? I—I work on the magazine."

"Oh," said Sam.

Johnny nudged Sam. "I think it's time to beat it. The barkeep's telephoned for John Law. Gangway, folks, the fun's over."

A LANE was quickly made for them and Johnny and Sam reached the door. They were none too soon, for they had scarcely cleared it, than a uniformed policeman came tearing around the corner nearby and bore down on Dinky Maguire's Pretzel Parlor.

Johnny and Sam walked swiftly to the door of the 45th Street Hotel. They stepped into the elevator and made sure this time that they got off at the eighth floor.

Inside their room, Johnny said petulantly, "That was a fine glass of beer we didn't have."

"I said we ought to move away from this street," Sam groused. "It's got so you can't do anything any more. This hotel—"

Johnny nodded, his face creased in annoyance. "I'm ready to move; all we need's the dough."

"That's what *I* said. One good pitch and we'd have it."

"All right," Johnny sighed. "Break out the books."

"Now you're talking, Johnny." Sam went eagerly to the big trunk. As he put his hands on the lid Johnny said drily, "Be funny if there'd be a corpse in this one, too."

"Funny," said Sam. "I don't—" He lifted the lid. His hoarse cry caused Johnny to whirl and leap to his side. One glance into the trunk and Johnny leaped to the door. He jerked it open, stared at the number on the door and came back.

"It's *our* room!"

II

SAM had already let the lid fall back on the trunk. He reeled away. "It can't be, Johnny."

"It is. And it's our trunk this time. But what—" He strode to the door of the clothes closet and pulled it open. Stack upon stack of books were piled on the floor.

He stared at them and Sam came and breathed hoarsely down his collar. "Gee, they took the books out of the trunk an'—"

"We're drunk, Sam," said Johnny slowly.

"But we didn't drink anything!"

"Then we're crazy. This *couldn't* happen. This is the same stiff that was in Room 721, a half hour ago. How could it have got up here in *our* room?"

Sam clapped a hand to his broad forehead. "We're sunk, Johnny. The cops!"

"The cops, yeah, the cops." A shudder ran through Johnny Fletcher. "All right, let's get it out of here."

"What?"

"The stiff. We can't keep it in our trunk, can we? For all we know the cops may already be on their way here. We've got to get rid of it!"

"How? Where can we ditch it?"

"I don't know, but—" Johnny Fletcher's eyes darted around to the window, which opened on a courtyard. Sam Cragg, watching Johnny, winced.

"No, Johnny."

"No, I guess not. Just the same, you'd better pull down the window shade."

Sam obeyed. When he turned from the window he saw Johnny opening the trunk lid once more. Sam remained by the window until Johnny called to him.

"The hell with them, Sam. They can't park their corpses in *our* room. We'll take it back."

"Back to—to Room 721?"

"That's right."

Sam cried out. "Johnny, the chances!"

"Stay here. I'll go investigate. Don't leave the room."

Sam shuddered and crowded forward. "I'll go with you."

"No!" Johnny said, sharply. "Stand by the door, with your shoulder against it. Just in case." Before Sam could protest further Johnny pulled open the door and stepped out.

There was no one in the corridor. He walked casually to the elevator, looked around, then darted to the staircase. He took the carpeted stairs two at a time.

The corridor of the seventh floor was also empty. Johnny's eyes narrowed and he stepped to the door of Room 721. With his hand reaching for it he stopped. The door was slightly ajar. He was sure he and Sam had closed it after their precipitate departure.

But of course. Someone had been inside since then—and out again.

He took another step toward the door. Inside the room, someone hummed softly. Johnny straining his ears, gasped silently. The humming was definitely feminine.

Johnny raised his hand and rapped lightly on the door. The humming stopped and a woman's voice called, "Yes?"

Johnny mumbled something unintelligible. The woman inside came to the door, pulled it open.

Johnny did not have to pretend surprise. The girl who faced him was beautiful enough to be a Powers model. She was tall and slender, with a fair complexion and the most gorgeously golden blond hair Johnny had ever seen.

He blinked. "Uh, isn't this Mr. Cragg's room?"

The girl smiled and shook her head. "Definitely not, and your technique is old fashioned. Scram!"

"Believe it or not," Johnny grinned. "My pal, Cragg, had this room this morning. Eight twenty-one."

"This is *seven* twenty-one and do you go quietly or do I call the house dick?"

"Okay," Johnny conceded, "but you can't blame a guy, can you?"

THE blonde made a brushing motion with her hand. "I work for a living and I know too many Johns now."

"Bingo! *My* name is John. Johnny to my pals. Johnny Fletcher. And you?"

"Jill. Whoa! I said , *ixnay*." The girl closed the door firmly in Johnny's face. He heard the bolt shoot on the inside. He nodded quietly, then turned and headed back to the stairs.

He stepped up close to the door of Room 821. "All right, Sam."

Sam opened the door a crack, peered out, then opened the door. Johnny did not step in. "Bring it," he said.

Sam's face recoiled as if Johnny had struck it. "Huh?"

"Hurry, we haven't got all day."

Sam disappeared. But a moment later Johnny heard his deep breathing and pushed in the door. He stepped back quickly and darted another look up and down the corridor. Then he nodded.

Sam followed Johnny, carrying the gruesome object. Johnny went to the stairs, but instead of going down, went up this time. Sam followed. At the top of the flight, Johnny held Sam back, while he reconnoitered. Then he stepped quickly across the corridor and jerked open the door of the linen closet, next to the door of Room 921.

He gestured to Sam and the latter crossed the open space and stooping set down the body. Johnny let the door swing shut.

"Okay."

They hurried back to their own room. Sam locked the door on the inside and went to the bathroom to wash his hands and mop the perspiration from his face. When he came out he found Johnny piling books into the trunk.

"I've aged fifteen years, Johnny," Sam said wearily. "And I don't think I'll ever be able to open another trunk as long as I live."

"That was about the dirtiest trick we ever had played on us," Johnny declared, "and when I get the guy who did it—"

"No!" Sam cried. "You ain't—you ain't figurin' on playing detective again, are you?"

"I don't like dead men being stuffed into my trunk."

Sam groaned and threw himself full length upon the nearest bed. "Here we go again. I knew this joint was a jinx. We shoulda—"

A woman's scream tore through the hotel. Sam leaped up from the bed. "Holy cats! What?"

Johnny waved him back. "Lie down, Sam, that's only the chambermaid finding the stiff. It's a dirty trick on her, but if she'd been on the job, *we* wouldn't have found it—twice! Now, let's see how long it takes for the cops to get here."

He put the last of the books into the trunk and slammed down the lid. Then he went to the far bed and stretched out on it. He stared at the dingy ceiling.

Doors were opening and closing in the corridors. Feet hurried across the worn rugs and the elevators were humming continuously.

On the bed next to Johnny's, Sam Cragg trembled. "I still think we shoulda scrammed outta here, Johnny. You know

how Peabody is, anything used to happen around here he blamed us for it."

"Ah, Peabody," said Johnny.

KNUCKLES rapped lightly on the door. Johnny called, "Who is it?"

"Me, Eddie Miller."

"Come!"

A slender, sharp-faced youth in the smart uniform of a bellboy opened the door.

"Hi, Mr. Fletcher; Sammy Cragg! I heard you checked in."

"Greetings, Eddie," said Johnny. "How have you been?"

"So-so, Mr. Fletcher. Things been quiet around the joint. I knew they'd pick up with you back."

Johnny raised his head and looked over the big mound that was Sam Cragg, on the adjoining twin bed. "That has all the earmarks of a crack, Eddie."

The bellboy grinned. "Uh-huh, Mr. Fletcher. I'm on *your* side. Only ten minutes ago, Mr. Peabody got back from a hotel manager's convention and saw your names on the register. You shoulda heard him howl."

"I did. His voice sounded like a woman's, who's just seen a mouse."

"That was a woman. Mmm, Gussie the chambermaid, right above you on the ninth floor. She found a dead man in the linen closet."

Johnny Fletcher exclaimed. "What a dump! First thing you know they'll be planting corpses in the guests' rooms."

"Mmm," said Eddie Miller. "Could happen. Well, I just thought I'd tip you off about Peabody."

"Why, Eddie?"

"Oh, I dunno. I just thought, well, you know, and you and him never got along so well."

"We'll see you around, Eddie. By the way, what's the name of the good-looking blonde right under us. I saw her in the elevator."

"Yeah? Don't blame you, Mr. Fletcher. She's a pip. Her name's Jill Thayer. She's an artist."

"An artist? She doesn't look it."

"Well, I guess you'd really call her a cartoonist. She draws funny pictures. But you've got competition there. She's got a boy-friend lives here at the hotel. Name of Ken Ballinger. He draws Blockhead."

"Blockhead!" exclaimed Sam Cragg. "What the—"

Eddie Miller brightened. "D'you read it? I guess everybody does. Swell stuff."

"What," asked Johnny Fletcher, "is Blockhead? Or is it who?"

"Who. Gosh, ain't you seen Blockhead the Strong Man? It's a comic strip, runs in all the newspapers and you hear him on the radio and see him in the movies. Then there's the magazine, that's what Ballinger does."

"Can you get me a copy?"

"Sure, it only costs a dime. I'll pick it up at the newsstand downstairs. On the cuff?"

"Eh?"

Eddie Miller grinned. "I just wanted to know. Okay, I'll run up with it."

The bellboy slipped out of the room. Sam Cragg started to talk, but Johnny Fletcher placed a finger to his lips and swinging off the bed, said, "Great kid, that Eddie Miller. Probably own this hotel some day."

Noiselessly he stepped to the door and jerked it open. Eddie Miller almost tumbled into the room, but he picked himself up and dusted his knees nonchalantly.

"I was tyin' my shoelace," he said. "Thanks for the recommend, Mr. Fletcher."

"You're welcome, Eddie. Remind me to talk to my friend, the manager of the Barbizon-Waldorf, about you."

"What, again?"

Johnny closed the door and came back into the room. "As I was saying, Eddie Miller'll probably own this hotel some day if he doesn't get killed by one of the guests."

Out in the corridor the elevator door clanged. Voices approached and after a moment, heavy knuckles massaged the door of Room 821.

"Well," Johnny said, "this is it, I guess. Come in, Mr. Peabody!"

The door was shoved inwards and a big, square-built man almost filled the doorway. The slender Mr. Peabody, manager of the 45th Street Hotel, peered around from behind the big man.

"Well, well, fellows!" boomed the big man. "Welcome back to the big town. If you'd let me know you were coming I'd have had a paddy wagon meet you at the station."

"Phooey," sniffed Sam Cragg.

But Johnny Fletcher gave the big man the glad hand. "Lieutenant Madigan! How are you, old socks? Bet you've been having a tough time solving your cases without me around. You wouldn't have a nice juicy one on tap, that you've been having trouble with it?"

"As a matter of fact, Johnny Fletcher," said Lieutenant Madigan of Homicide, "I've got one, right on your doorstep."

"Mr. Fletcher," Peabody, the hotel manager cut in, "I just learned that you had checked into the hotel this afternoon. You know the rules—"

"You've told them to me often enough. But I still don't like them. And Mr. Peabody, I simply must protest about a few things around here. Your elevators are much, much too noisy. And the maid left only two towels in the bathroom. *We* wash twice a day, Mr. Peabody."

Mr. Peabody got very red in the face. "If you don't like the service, why do you always come back to this hotel?"

"Because I like *you,* Mr. Peabody. And so does Sam. Don't you, Sammy?"

"Yeah!"

Lieutenant Madigan chuckled. "It's a pleasure to hear you laddle it out, Johnny. But to get back to business; when did you and Cragg check in here?"

"This afternoon; why?"

"What time?"

"About one o'clock."

"And you've been in your room ever since?"

Johnny grimaced. "What is this, Maddy? Have you joined the Gestapo? Do we have to register with the police these days?"

"It might be a good idea—in your case. I have a reason for asking."

"You mean because of the stiff upstairs?"

Mr. Peabody yipped, but Lieutenant Madigan said quickly, "How do you know about that, Fletcher?"

"Didn't I hear the yell? I'm not deaf, you know. Anyway, one of the bellboys mentioned it."

"Eddie Miller!" howled Peabody. "I'll fire that boy."

"I'd like to see you try it."

Lieutenant Madigan scowled. "All right, Fletcher. You know about the dead man. What else can you tell me?"

"A chambermaid found the body in the linen closet on the ninth floor. References; the bell boy. That's all."

"Is it? *You* didn't see the body?"

"Should I have?"

"No, but I was wondering how he happened to have one of your books in his hand."

"What?"

"Don't you and Cragg sell a book called *Every Man a Samson?*"

"Of course. That's how we make all the money we pay these hotels."

Mr. Peabody again opened his mouth, but Lieutenant Madigan waved him down. "All right, how'd the dead man get hold of this book?"

"I wouldn't know. We haven't sold any in New York. We only just got back in town. Let's see the book."

"I haven't got it?"

"Wouldn't he give it up?"

"As a matter of fact," said Lieutenant Madigan, "he didn't exactly have a book in his hand. But some blood got on his

hand and the hand must have got on to the book, because it took off part of the cover, an impression. Where're your books?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to check them over?"

"Why?"

"To see if there's any blood on them."

"Are you crazy, Madigan? The body was found upstairs. How would blood from it get on one of my books?"

"That's what I want to find out."

Johnny blinked and shook his head. "My books are in the trunk—naturally. The trunk's been locked ever since the porter brought it up this afternoon."

"Let me have the key."

"Tsk. Tsk. Can you beat it, I lost the key on'y yesterday."

Lieutenant Madigan bared his teeth. "Then I'll break it open."

"You'll break it open, Lieutenant?" Johnny laughed shortly. "My hundred and fifty dollar trunk?"

"A hundred and fifty—ahhrr! Cut it out, Fletcher. You know that's a second hand cardboard box."

"I say it's worth a hundred and fifty dollars, Lieutenant, and that's what it's going to cost somebody if they break it."

"I'll get a locksmith, Fletcher."

Johnny beamed. "That's better! I don't mind your looking—just as long as you don't break the trunk."

Lieutenant Madigan glowered and then turned to the door. "I'll be back in ten minutes; don't try leaving here."

"We won't, Maddy, old boy. We're just as curious as you are, aren't we, Sammy?"

"Yeah, sure," grunted Sam Cragg.

Madigan strode out, but Peabody lingered. "Now, Mr. Fletcher, about the rent."

Johnny Fletcher stepped over suddenly and placed the flat of his hand on Mr. Peabody's thin chest. "You heard what the lieutenant said, Peabody? Well?" He shoved suddenly on Mr. Peabody and to prevent falling, the hotel manager took two or three quick backward steps, which carried him out into the hall. Johnny closed the door in his face and bolted it.

"Mr. Fletcher!" Peabody cried through the thin door panels.

Johnny whirled into the room. "Quick, Sam, the trunk."

"What? You can't get rid of it."

"The books! Take them out and look them over!"

They both rushed to the trunk and then Johnny quickly unlocked it and began handing out books to Sam Cragg. There were more than a hundred in the trunk and they had to work fast. They were more than halfway down before Johnny touched one that was sticky. He grunted and stood it carefully on end and continued the search. Another was found that had blood on it and then near the bottom still another with a tiny red smear.

Johnny took the books to the bathroom and wrapped them in a towel. When he got back Sam had returned most of the volumes to the trunk. Johnny shot a quick look around the room, then stepped to the door. He put his ear to it and heard deep breathing outside. Which was as he had expected. Lieutenant Madigan had put a guard outside the door.

III

HE WENT to the window. It had grown dark outside, but he could make out the roof of the adjoining six-

story building directly across the courtyard. He leaned out of the window and was about to throw the towel-wrapped bundle across the space, when he saw the light of the window directly below—the room of Jill Thayer, the cartoonist.

He frowned. The roof wasn't safe. Madigan was too shrewd not to search it. He whipped off his necktie, got Sam's and tied them together. He tied one end about the bundle, then went again to the window. Leaning out, he lowered the bundle to the top of the window below and let it swing gently so that it knocked the glass.

Almost instantly the girl below came to the window and sticking out her head looked up. "Hold this for me, will you?" Johnny called softly.

"Are you crazy?" the girl gasped.

"No," Johnny retorted. "I'm in a jam. The cops, they're outside my door. C'mon, be a sport."

Lieutenant Madigan's fist banged the door. "All right, Fletcher, open up!"

Johnny groaned. "They're banging on my door now," he whispered hoarsely. "Grab this—or I'm sunk."

"Come on, Fletcher!" Madigan cried.

Johnny said, "I'm letting go!" And he did.

He turned back to the room, looked at Sam's taut, gray face—and listened. He didn't hear the bundle hit the courtyard floor.

"All right, Sam," he said. "Open the door for the gorilla." Quickly he darted to lock the trunk, then returned and threw himself upon one of the beds.

Sam unlocked the door. "Why don't you break the door down?"

"I would've in a minute." He motioned to a slender, dark-complexioned man who stood in the doorway. "There's the trunk; get it open."

Johnny Fletcher sat up on the bed and yawned. "I must've fallen asleep. Been here long, copper?"

Madigan glowered. "In a couple of minutes I'll talk to you, Fletcher. And maybe you won't enjoy hearing what I'm going to say."

The locksmith took a bunch of keys from his pocket, pawed through them and tried one in the lock of the trunk. The spring-lock snapped open. "There you are, officer; a very common type of cheap lock."

"Thanks," snapped Madigan.

He turned to the trunk as a squat thick-set man came into the room. "Ah, Foxie!" said Johnny Fletcher.

Detective Fox grimaced. "I'm going to get you guys down at Headquarters, yet. Maybe this is the time."

"You hope."

"All right, Fox," said Madigan. "You know what to look for." He took out a handful of books. " 'Every Man a Samson'," he said sarcastically. "How you sell this crap I don't know."

"How about buying one yourself, Lieutenant?" Johnny asked. "Make you nice and strong—like Sam Cragg."

"No, it wouldn't," Sam cut in. "You got to have something to start with."

"An ox is strong, to," Madigan retorted, "but it hasn't got much brains."

The deeper Madigan got into the books, the more fiercely he scowled. He began scrutinizing the books more closely.

"Don't wear off the covers," Johnny chided, "or we'll have to charge you for them."

LIEUTENANT MADIGAN made an unintelligible sound. Johnny Fletcher let him get to the bottom of the trunk, then said, "Just to show you how smart you are, Madigan, is the dead man a midget? 'Cause if he isn't, he couldn't have been in the trunk with all those books."

Madigan straightened. "What?"

Detective Fox looked at his superior with shocked eyes. "He was a big fellow, Lieutenant."

"I saw him," Madigan snapped. His face was reddening and he dropped a handful of books into the trunk. "I still think—"

"You do?" Johnny looked at him mockingly.

With most of the books still piled on the rug outside the trunk, Madigan slammed down the lid. "The hell with you, Fletcher. But remember, I'll be thinking about you. Come on, Fox!"

Johnny waited until they were at the door, then he called, "Thanks for having my trunk opened, Maddy, old boy!"

Lieutenant Madigan slammed the door.

Sam Cragg said, "Whew!" and dropped into the shabby armchair. Johnny grinned in relief. "Kinda fast for awhile, but it's okay now, Sam."

"I dunno. I hope so!"

Someone knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" Johnny snapped.

"Bellboy!"

Eddie Miller came in, grinning. He thrust a gaudy magazine at Johnny. "Here she is, Blockhead the Strong Man. Ten cents and the best dime's worth you ever bought. Three million kids can't be wrong."

"Three million—"

"It says right on the cover, 'three million circulation.' And like I told you, that ain't all. Blockhead runs in 500 newspapers. He's on the radio and they got him running in a movie serial over on Eighth Avenue."

Johnny gave the boy a dime. Eddie Miller turned it over and looked at it as if it were some strange specimen.

"Don't you want it?" Johnny snapped.

"Yeah, sure, only—so you *are* broke again. Peabody won't like that."

"Yeah, Peabody; he was up here awhile ago. Said something about firing a certain bellboy."

Eddie Miller grinned impudently. "Not me, he won't. I know where the body's buried."

"Where, Eddie?"

"That's telling."

"For how much?"

"You mean it?"

"Sure, it might come in handy. Uh, Peabody has a one-track mind, sometimes."

"You mean about the rent? Well, I dunno if this'll do *you* any good, but he collects French postcards."

Johnny whistled. "Peabody?"

"Uh-huh, and he reads spicy magazines."

"Which ones?" Sam Cragg asked.

Eddie shrugged. "Racy Stories, Hotsy-Totsy Stories, Oh Baby—there's a whole raft of them."

"And Peabody reads them. Tsk. Tsk. Interesting, but I don't see how I can make any profit out of it."

"It's worth keeping in mind. Well, I see you made out all right with the cops."

"Why shouldn't we, Eddie?"

"No reason," Eddie said hastily. "Only I was thinking, things don't happen in the hotel when you and Sam are away."

"Thinking is bad—for growing boys, Eddie."

Eddie Miller sniffed. "Growing boy! And me a bellhop for seven years. Mister Fletcher, I could write a book!"

WITH an injured air Eddie Miller took his departure. Johnny tossed the copy of *Blockhead* to Sam and reached for the telephone.

"Who are you calling, Johnny?" Sam asked.

"Room 721, please," Johnny said into the telephone.

Sam exclaimed. "Nix, Johnny. Let it slide."

"How can I. . . . Hello, Jill? This is Johnny. How about—"

Jill Thayer cut him off. "Listen, you lowdown—"

"Eh, eh!" Johnny cried. "Walls have ears, you know. I was wondering if you'd like to inhale a glass of beer down in the cocktail room?"

He could hear her inhale sharply. Then she said, "Can't, I have a date this evening. I was just about to go out."

"This'll only take five minutes. It's—well, you know."

"I don't know, but I'd like to know. Very well, in five minutes, down in the cocktail room!"

"Swell!"

Johnny hung up to meet Sam's accusing eye. "When'd you meet *her?*"

"Awhile ago. After all, I've got to explain about those books."

"Why?"

"Because. Come on, if you're coming."

Sam rolled up the copy of *Blockhead* and followed Johnny from the room. The latter locked the door carefully.

As they stepped out of the elevator, Mr. Peabody, who was pacing the lobby nervously, bore down on them. "Mr. Fletcher, I want to talk to you."

"I want to talk to *you,* Peabody. What's the idea bringing cops up to our room?"

Peabody gasped. "*I* bring police to *your* room? It's you who brings all this trouble to my hotel."

"Are you nuts? Because the cutthroats who hang out at this dump kill each other, is it my fault?"

"Shh! Not so loud—please! I'm not happy about this at all, Mr. Fletcher."

"I shouldn't think you would be. Be seeing you around."

"Wait! There's that other matter—the room rent."

"Baggage, Mr. Peabody," said Johnny. "We've got baggage. You're always hollering about the rules, well, you know that one very well. Guests with luggage don't have to pay in advance."

"But all you've got in your trunk is a bunch of books."

"Show me the rule that says a guest can't carry books in his luggage. Show me that and I'll be very happy to pay a week's rent in advance. Otherwise—see you in a week, huh?"

Johnny winked and headed for the cocktail room.

The place was about what you'd expect in connection with a hotel like the 45th Street, a short bar, a few booths with dim lights and a smell of stale beer.

"Two beers," Johnny said to the bartender as they walked up to the bar.

"Speak for yourself, Johnny," Sam Cragg said peevishly. "After a day like today, I want a Scotch and soda."

"Two beers," Johnny repeated.

"Coming up."

As the bartender put the beer before them, Jill Thayer came into the place. She was wearing a silver lamé evening dress, a silver fox cape and her hair had stardust scattered in it. There was a newspaper wrapped parcel under her arm.

Johnny whistled softly, "Jill! You're looking more beautiful every day. Allow me to present my friend and assistant, Sam Cragg."

Jill Thayer gave Johnny the cold eye, then shifted it to Sam, after which she moved to one of the booths, some distance from the bar. Johnny carried his glass of beer to the booth and Sam followed.

"Will you have a beer?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," said Jill Thayer. "Waiter! A champagne cocktail."

Johnny winced. "Okay, it's on me. You helped us out of a tight spot."

Jill shoved the parcel across the table. "There, keep it! Now, answer me just one question; what made you think that I would accept that—*that* from you?"

"Well," said Johnny. "He was in your room first."

"What?"

"Yep. In your trunk."

"What're you talking about?" Jill exclaimed.

The bartender brought the champagne cocktail at that moment, and Johnny waited

until he had gone. Then he said, "I mean, we went into your room a couple of hours ago—by mistake. The elevator operator let us off the wrong floor and we didn't notice until we were inside."

"Wait a minute! How could you get inside my room without a key?"

"The door was unlocked, standing ajar."

"It was locked when I came in at five-thirty."

"Sure. And he wasn't in the trunk then."

"He?" Jill's eyes widened. "What do you mean, he? The—"

"The corpse," Johnny said softly. "Your room is exactly like ours and you have a trunk that's almost a twin of our own, except that it's a little newer. We didn't notice that at first. Sam opened your trunk, saw it—and then we scrammed. An hour later we returned to our room and the stiff had been moved from your trunk in your room to our trunk in our room."

Jill just stared at Johnny Fletcher. "Are you crazy?"

"Some people have said so," Johnny admitted. "But just for the fun of it, take a good look in your trunk. If there are no bloodstains——"

JILL shuddered. "Admit for the moment that a corpse *was* in my trunk. How would it have gotten there?"

"That's what the cops would like to know."

"And another thing, if the body was in *your* trunk, how is it that it was later found in the linen closet on the ninth floor?"

"We put it there. We moved it out of our trunk. After all, it wasn't our stiff, was it?"

"No. But whose was it?"

Johnny shrugged. "Lieutenant Madigan wasn't in a confiding mood—if he knew. We didn't examine him that closely. Naturally."

Walter the bartender called, "Miss Thayer, Mr. Ballinger is in the lobby. Shall I?"

"Yes, tell him to come in."

"Ken Ballinger?" Johnny asked.

"My date. You know him?"

"No, but the name sounds familiar."

Ken Ballinger came into the cocktail lounge. He was the drunk from Dinky Maguire's Pretzel Parlor. Behind him came his friend.

Ballinger was sober and did not recognize either Johnny or Sam. But the other man did.

"Ken," said Jill Thayer, "this is Mr. Fletcher and Mr.—er, Scragg. And Mr. Hale."

"Cragg," scowled Sam Cragg. "And we've met."

Harry Hale grinned at Sam Cragg. "I was hoping I'd meet you again."

"You want to make something of it?"

"Yes, but not in the way you mean. Ken, this is the lad who manhandled you."

Ken Ballinger wheeled on Sam Cragg. "I don't believe it."

"Don't mind me," Jill Thayer said dryly.

"Excuse me, Jill," laughed Harry Hale. "I'll let you in on it. Ken and I were at Dinky's this afternoon and Ken, uh, I mean there was a little misunderstanding."

"I still don't believe it," Ken said sullenly. "He isn't so big."

"He's deceptive," Johnny said.

"In a peanut shell," Harry Hale cut in, "Mr. Cragg is Blockhead, come to life."

Sam growled. "Lay off that Blockhead stuff. I was just looking in this magazine and—"

"Good, isn't it?" asked Harry Hale. "I'm the editor—and Ken here draws Blockhead."

SAM looked narrowly from one to the other. "Yeah? Well, look, I don't go for this. This Blockhead, he couldn't do what he does. It ain't possible. Nobody could pick up a street car in one hand."

"Couldn't you?"

"Of course not. Nobody could. And

nobody could fly around in the air without an airplane."

"Three million readers can't be wrong."

"Eddie Miller the bellboy said the same thing," Johnny said. "This rag actually has three million paid subscribers?"

"Not paid subscribers, but buyers. It's practically all newsstand sale."

Johnny looked at Jill Thayer for confirmation. She nodded. "It's true, but don't ask me why. Blockhead has caught on and three million kids lay down a dime apiece for it every month."

"Do you work on the magazine, too?"

Jill Thayer shook her head. "Such is fame. The man never heard of me."

"Jill's the best cartoonist in the country," Ken Ballinger said. Then added, "The best woman cartoonist. She draws for the highbrow magazines. Didn't you ever see Little Cleo?"

Johnny brightened. "In *Freedom?*"

"Right!" said Harry Hale. "And what business are you in, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Me? I'm at liberty right now."

"Ah, stage?"

"Kind of."

"Good. Then this may interest you. I'd like to have Mr. Cragg give a little performance this evening."

JILL THAYER exclaimed. "But aren't you going to Royce's party?"

"That's it. I want the boss to see something. He's always sneering about how impossible Blockhead is. I want Mr. Cragg to give a small exhibition of his strength."

"Ah," said Johnny. "Now you're talking. Sam is the strongest man in the world. Aren't you, Sam?"

"Sure. It's a small world."

Ken Ballinger cocked his head to one side. "How much do you weigh, Cragg?"

"Two hundred, or thereabouts."

"And you're not over five feet eight. I still don't believe it. I weigh a hundred and eighty myself and—"

"Stop, Ken!" cried Harry Hale. "I saw him hold you, then slap down socko."

"Sam can break a logging chain merely by his chest expansion," Johnny Fletcher said.

"Can he? I mean, could he do it tonight—at this party?"

"Well—" said Johnny, "that depends."

"Of course, we expect to pay for the performance."

"How much?"

"What else can he do—in the strong-arm line, I mean?"

"I'll tell you what," said Johnny. "We have a sort of act. Takes about fifteen minutes. Uh, we're a little rusty and we'd like to run through it with an audience. You promise to let us run through the complete act and it won't cost you a thing."

"I'm perfectly willing to pay. A reasonable sum, of course. Say, twenty-five dollars?"

"Mmm. Well, all right. What's the address?"

"The Bannerman on Gracie Square. I'll tell you what; we have a Blockhead costume. If Mr. Cragg could wear that during the act, it would give it a better touch —as far as we're concerned. This party is for the staff of *Blockhead,* you know. And their friends. There'll be sixty or seventy people there."

"The more the better."

"I still don't believe it," muttered Ken Ballinger.

Jill Thayer sighed. "I don't believe you were sober this afternoon either, Ken. Well, it's after eight. Don't you think we'd better get started for this brawl?"

"If I get there when the party breaks up, it's soon enough for me."

"No-no, Kenny," chided Harry Hale. "Mustn't. You promised me you'd behave."

"Oh, I will. You don't have to worry. I'll say, 'Yes, Mr. Royce. Thank you, Mr. Royce'."

"Ken!" exclaimed Jill Thayer.

"Oh, all right. Come on."

"You won't disappoint us, Mr. Cragg?"

"We'll be there in a half hour. Just get

some things together. We'll see you at the brawl, all of you."

Johnny smiled pleasantly until the trio had gone, then he whirled on Sam Cragg. "We're in the money, Sam."

"I don't think he'll pay the twenty-five bucks, Johnny," Sam said. "And I don't like that business of the Blockhead uniform."

"If it amuses them, what's the difference? And don't worry about not collecting. I'll collect. Now, run and see if you can't get a box from Eddie Miller. A big carton that'll hold about forty or fifty books—"

"Books! Say, you're not going to—"

"He said he'd let us go through the act, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but—you think?"

"A man can only try," said Johnny, chuckling.

IV

AND so fifteen minutes later they were in a taxicab heading for the east side and ten minutes after leaving the hotel they were climbing out in front of a tall building on the East River. A doorman looked dubiously at the big carton Sam was carrying.

"Mr. Royce's apartment," Johnny said.

"It's the penthouse, but packages—"

"We're guests," Johnny said, sharply.

"Oh! Right this way, please."

They stepped into the elevator and were whisked to the top floor, from where they had to walk up one flight to the penthouse level. A liveried servant met them at the entrance.

"Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Cragg," Johnny said loftily.

"Can I have your things, gentlemen?"

"No, we're going to need them. Little performance we're giving."

"Thank you, sir. This way."

They walked across a short stretch of graveled roof into a huge living room that was crowded with laughing, shouting, talking men and women. Harry Hale had not exaggerated in estimating the attendance to be sixty or seventy persons. There were probably closer to a hundred. And practically all were holding liquor glasses.

A man with iron-gray hair and a profile came up as they entered. "Welcome! Sorry if I don't recall the names."

"Fletcher and Cragg. Harry Hale invited us."

"Oh, Harry. You're not—"

"Yeah, Blockhead," Sam Cragg snorted.

The man sized up Sam and a little frown came to his face. "How do you do? I'm Matt Royce, the host. Mmm, Harry said —I think he's wrong."

"He trims down good," Johnny said cheerfully.

Harry Hale dashed up. "Hello there, Fletcher—Cragg. Ah, you've met Mr. Royce. If you'll come with me to one of the bedrooms, I've a costume that I believe will fit Cragg. Excuse us, Boss!"

As they followed Hale, Cragg muttered out of the side of his mouth. "I don't like it, Johnny."

"*I* like it," said Johnny. "I also like twenty-five bucks."

"All right, it's your funeral."

"Whose funeral?" Harry Hale asked over his shoulder. Then he pushed open a door. "This place'll do."

He entered and scowled. A man and a red-headed woman were just breaking a clinch. "Excuse me, folks."

The redhead, a very nice looking one, patted her coiffure. "Didn't you ever learn to knock on doors, Harry?"

"My mother bought me a copy of Emily Post when I was ten," Harry Hale retorted, "but I didn't like the pictures in it. They weren't funny. I didn't know *you'd* been invited, Murphy."

"I wasn't," Murphy replied. "I'm a gatecrasher. Turnabout, you know. Royce crashed into my business, so I'm crashing his party. Ha-ha."

"Ha-ha," Hale said, mirthlessly. "By the way, Lulu, like you to meet Blockhead

the Strong Man. Blockhead, this is *Mrs.* Royce."

Sam Cragg said thickly, "Look, Hale, I don't—"

Johnny Fletcher cut in: "His name is Sam Cragg. And I'm Johnny Fletcher." He winked at Mrs. Lulu Royce. "We're going to put on a little show for the folks. Strongman stuff, you know—"

"Very strongman, Lulu," Hale said sardonically. "You can feel his muscles."

"I'd love to," Lulu Royce murmured. "Come, Danny boy."

She and Murphy left the room. Hale made a clucking sound with his mouth. "The boss' wife—and his deadliest enemy."

"Tsk, tsk!" said Johnny. "Well, where is this little costume of yours?"

Hale picked up a box from a dressing table. "Here it is." He broke the string and opened the box. Sam Cragg took one look and uttered a hoarse cry of dismay.

Johnny Fletcher had the grace to whistle, but grinned crookedly.

HARRY HALE took the costume out of the box. "Like it?" He held up a leopard skin.

"There ain't no one big enough to make me wear a thing like that!" Sam Cragg snarled.

"No?" Johnny went up and whispered in Sam's ear. "We've now got less than six bucks between us and starvation."

Perspiration came out on Sam's forehead. "Do I—do I wear underwear under it?"

"Heck, no, it would show. But it's well made. Our artist's model wears it. You may find it a little tight, but—" Hale shrugged.

Five minutes later Sam Cragg stood with a leopard skin draped over his muscular body.

It covered his torso from well above the knees to his waist, then a piece of leopard skin went over his left shoulder and down his back. A pair of sandals with leather thongs laced halfway up the calves completed the ensemble.

Sam wobbled to the mirror, cried out and reeled back. "I won't face people in this!"

"I think myself he looks kinda nice," Harry Hale said, waggishly. "The girls'll

go crazy about him. Lulu Royce especially. She likes big, strong men."

"Take the box, Sammy," said Johnny pointing to the carton they had brought with them.

Sam obeyed.

Harry Hale went to the door leading into the living room and threw it wide open.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried at the top of his voice. "—Blockhead the Strong Man!"

The hum of conversation died for a moment, then gasps of astonishment went up as Sam Cragg slunk out of the bedroom.

"I'll take over," Johnny said to Harry Hale. He moved so his back was against the wall, then threw up his hands and roared in a voice that drowned out every other noise in the room: "Ladies and gentlemen, you all know Blockhead, the Strong Man, the strongest man in the world. Three million kids follow his adventures every month in the magazine, forty million on the radio, sixty million in the movies—and here he is in person—and I mean he's really Blockhead the Strong Man. He can do anything Blockhead can. Sam—I mean, Blockhead—the telephone directory!"

With a flick of his fingers Sam Cragg broke the heavy cord that bound the carton. He reached inside and brought out a Manhattan phone directory. He held it

aloft so everyone in the room could see it, then brought it down in front of him and tore it in half almost without effort. He tossed the two sections to the floor.

"That's nothing!" howled Johnny Fletcher. "Blockhead, the belt!"

Sam took a heavy web belt from the box. It was the sort commonly known as an army belt. Johnny took it from Sam and placed it around the latter's chest, twisting and knotting it in front.

"You think he can't break that?" Johnny asked of the audience. "There isn't another man in this room who could, but—Blockhead!"

Sam clenched his fist, let out his breath, then inhaled slowly. The belt tightened, seemed to cut into Sam's flesh, and snapped with a pop. Johnny caught it as it flew away and held up the ragged edges.

"Is there any man here who thinks he can break a similar belt? Of course there isn't. There aren't over twenty men in this entire country who could do it and none could do it with less effort than Blockhead. But that's only natural because Blockhead is the strongest man in the world. How do I know? I made him so. Look—"

Johnny pointed at Sam's bulging muscles, struck his chest with his fist. "You wouldn't think to look at him now that he was once a puny weakling. But he was. When he first came to me he weighed ninety-five pounds and was dying of consumption. At that time I had just learned the marvelous secrets of physical culture that have made the Aztapache Indians the strongest race in the world. I had lived among these Indians; I spoke their language and they called me brother. They confided in me. When Sam—I mean, Blockhead—came along he seemed a perfect specimen to experiment with. There was nothing to lose—he was dying anyway. So I applied the Aztapache principles of physical culture to him. In two weeks Blockhead's weight went up to 140 pounds and he was running five miles every morning before breakfast—not because he had to, but because he had so much vitality. He——whoa, wait a *minute!*"

He turned to Sam Cragg in astonishment. "Blockhead—you can't!"

Sam had taken an inch-thick logging chain from the carton and was twisting it about his chest. "No, no, Blockhead," Johnny cried. "You can't! A horse couldn't break that chain, much less a human being. What? You say you can? No, no, even Blockhead couldn't do that. What—"

Johnny shook his head in bewilderment, then turned back to the audience. "Folks," he cried, "Blockhead insists that he can break that chain as he broke the belt. Of course you know that's impossible. No human being could do it, but—wouldn't it be wonderful if he could do it, if he—*Blockhead!*"

Sam had gone into a crouch. With his feet spread wide apart he came up slowly, expanding his chest. The chain cut into his flesh and Sam's face became pink, then a violent red. Perspiration broke out on his forehead.

"Don't, Blockhead!" Johnny screamed. "You'll hurt yourself. Don't!"

And then the chain broke. It flew away from Sam and clanked to the floor with a terrific clatter. For an instant stunned silence hung over the room. It was broken by Johnny's bellow.

"*He did it!* He broke a chain that a horse couldn't break. He did it. Do you believe now that he's the strongest man in the world? Are you convinced now that these Aztapache physical culture secrets are the real McCoy? Are there any men here who are weak, sickly, rundown? Anyone who would like to become strong? Don't despair—*you can be!* I've got it all here. I didn't think it was right to keep this secret from the world, so I had it written up. The simple, secret exercises that turned Blockhead from a ninety-five pound weakling into the strongest man in the world. It's all here in this book." Timing it nicely,

Sam Cragg had delved into the paper carton and brought forth an armful of "Every Man a Samson." He tossed one copy to Johnny, who caught it and waved it over his head.

"It's all here in this astounding book, 'Every Man a Samson.' I'm going to let every man here have a copy and I'm not going to charge fifty dollars for it, nor even twenty-five or fifteen and heaven knows, it's worth ten times that. No, I'm going to pass out these wonderful little books for the puny, paltry, insignificant sum of one dollar and ninety-five cents—and here I come!"

"Mr. Fletcher!" cried Harry Hale, in horror. "You can't—"

Johnny grabbed an armful of books and brushed Harry Hale to one side. "Here you are, sir, the book that'll make you as strong as Blockhead. Thank you. Two dollars—five cents tax, makes it come out even. And you, sir? The little lady likes strong men. Miss, feel Blockhead's muscles."

The girl did—and so did a number of others as Sam followed Johnny through the crowd passing out books. The place was in an uproar, laughter prevailing and punctuated by Johnny Fletcher's booming voice as he exhorted men to buy copies of "Every Man a Samson." Harry Hale caught up with him once more, but still Johnny ignored him.

Then finally Johnny brought up face to face with the host, Matt Royce. "I suppose Harry Hale put you up to this?" Royce demanded, his face flushed in anger.

"Hale? No, it's my own idea. You'd like a copy?"

"No! But come to my office tomorrow morning."

"Sure, how about you, sir?"

"Pfft!" said Lieutenant Madigan of Homicide.

Johnny winced. He had not seen Madigan come in. "Crashing the party?"

"Yeah, and you? A very good pitch. I haven't heard better on 42nd Street."

"That's because I've been out of town. What's new?"

Lieutenant Madigan looked steadily at Sam Cragg. "You look natural in that pussy-cat skin."

Sam bared his teeth. "What I do to make a buck!"

Madigan chuckled and turned back to Johnny. "Where's the boss of this layout?"

"Right over there, the gent with the profile. Business with him?"

"And maybe you, too." Lieutenant Madigan went over to Matt Royce. "Mr. Royce, could I have a few minutes? I'm Lieutenant Madigan of Homicide."

Royce looked from Madigan to Johnny Fletcher. "Homicide?"

"Yes. Do you know a man named Hal Soderstrom?"

"Yes, why?"

"That's what I'd like to talk to you about."

"Homicide Squad, you mean—"

"Yes. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"Yes. Come along."

Madigan signaled to Johnny Fletcher. "You, too."

"Okay, we've about finished here anyway."

Sam was so willing to leave the crowded room that he ran ahead of the others to the bedroom and was already putting on his shirt when they entered.

ONCE the door was closed, Matt Royce nodded pointedly at Johnny. "What about them?"

"They're in this. You might call them suspects."

"Ixnay, Madigan," exclaimed Johnny. "There's such a thing as libel."

"Sue me. Mr. Royce, I understand Hal Soderstrom was an employee of yours."

"That's right, but I—I can't believe he's dead. I saw him only yesterday. And murdered!"

"He was found in a linen closet of the 45th Street Hotel, his head bashed in with

a blunt instrument. There were no identifying papers on his person, which is why it took several hours for us to identify him."

"How'd you finally do it?"

"Fingerprints. They were on file."

Royce looked sharply at Madigan. "Eh?"

"He'd served time in Sing Sing. Didn't you know that?"

"Good lord, no! What—what for?"

Madigan pursed his lips. "Blackmail. Three years."

Royce shook his head in bewilderment. "I hadn't the slightest idea. He worked for me four years or more."

"And he was a good employee?"

"Absolutely. Well, I mean he'd have a hangover now and then on a Monday, but I don't hold that against a man. I like a drink myself."

"In what capacity did he work for you?"

"Why, he was the business manager of *Blockhead.*"

"Blockhead? What—" Madigan's eyes went suddenly to Sam Cragg, who was almost fully dressed. "Say—that costume looked familiar. Sure, Blockhead. I get it now." His face twitched and he suddenly began to chuckle. "Sam Cragg—Blockhead."

"You think it's funny?" Sam sneered.

"If I'd had a camera I'd taken a picture of you in that costume and got rich selling prints at Coney Island."

"And you're a reader of *Blockhead,*" Johnny cut in sarcastically.

That brought Madigan back to business. He said to Royce, "I understand you're the publisher of *Blockhead.*"

"That's right. I'm president of the Royce Publishing Company. But I assure you Soderstrom's death had nothing to do with the affairs of the company. And I still don't see how these men have any connection with Soderstrom."

"I don't see myself. But there's a peculiar coincidence that touches them. There was blood on Soderstrom's hand and the hand had touched a book so that part of the title left its imprint on the hand. The complete title of the book is 'Every Man a Samson' and these men are salesmen for it."

"What?" Royce looked sharply at Johnny. "That was a real sales talk out there? Hale knew what you were and—"

"No," Johnny said, "he didn't know. He wanted to hire Sam to play Blockhead, promised to pay twenty-five dollars. I told him we had a regular strongman act and he said to put it on. Well, we did. Mmm, maybe I forgot to tell Hale that part of the act consisted of selling books at the end of the pitch."

"You *forgot,*" Madigan exclaimed. "I'll bet you forgot to tell him! Just one of your little stunts."

"You seem to know these men, Lieutenant?"

Madigan snorted. "Too well. I know—"

"Now, n o w, Lieutenant," Johnny chided. "Didn't I solve a case for you once? Is this the thanks I get?"

Madigan scratched his ear. "The devil of it, Mr. Royce, is that he's telling the truth. He did *help* with a case once—but he was mixed up in it as deep as he is in this one."

"And the case was just as tough!" Johnny winked at Madigan. "If you asked me nice I might help you with this one."

"No, thanks. Me and the police department will struggle along without your help. Unless, of course, you want to tell me how the imprint from that book got on Soderstrom's hand."

"I would if I could."

"Well," said Matt Royce. "What can I tell you about Soderstrom?"

"Everything there is to tell. Was he married?"

"Not in recent years. I understand he was divorced eight or ten years ago. He never spoke of his past, come to think of it. He started with me as an advertising salesman and when I launched *Blockhead*——"

"You published other magazines before *Blockhead?*"

"Yes, I've been in the publishing business fifteen years."

"What magazines?"

Royce made a deprecating gesture. "Nothing important. Some, uh, cats and dogs. *Blockhead* is the most successful magazine I have. And I don't mind saying that no small part of its success was due to Hal Soderstrom. I'm going to miss him."

"Of course. But you haven't really told me anything about him yet. He must have had some enemies, one at least."

V

BEFORE Royce could reply to that, there was a knock on the door and Harry Hale peeked in. When he saw that Sam Cragg was fully dressed he said, "Okay" over his shoulder and came in. Jill Thayer followed.

"Hi, Boss," Hale said breezily. "What'd you think of Blockhead?"

"I'll talk to you about that tomorrow."

"It was a magnificent performance," said Jill Thayer. "Especially Mr. Fletcher's."

Johnny chuckled. "Thank you kindly. Mr. Hale, there's a little matter — you know, the remuneration."

"What? Why you must have taken in fifty or sixty dollars."

"Maybe so, but you said you'd pay twenty-five dollars."

"Wearing that caveman outfit was worth twenty-five bucks," Sam Cragg groused.

"Please—" interrupted Matt Royce. "There are more important things. This is Lieutenant Madigan of the Police Department. Mr. Hale, editor of *Blockhead* and—excuse me—Miss Thayer, a famous cartoonist. Harry, the lieutenant brought some shocking information; Hal Soderstrom is dead."

"Hal?" cried Harry Hale. "No wonder he didn't show up tonight. Bad whiskey?"

"A blunt instrument," said Johnny Fletcher.

Lieutenant Madigan stepped forward. "You can go, Fletcher. I know where to reach you, in case."

"Oh, I don't mind sticking around if I can help."

"You can't. In four syllable words, beat it!"

"You mean you want me to go? All right, if that's what you want." With an injured air Johnny gestured to Jill Thayer. "I'll take you home."

Jill started to shake her head, then suddenly followed Johnny and Sam out of the room. Just outside the door Sam picked up the carton that had contained the books. "Some dirty crooks swiped the books that were left over. There must have been six or eight."

"S'tough," said Johnny. "Look, Jill. I rescued you. This Soderstrom is the lad who was in your trunk this afternoon."

"That's a lie," Jill declared hotly. "I scarcely knew the man."

"Oh, you did know him?"

"Slightly, I said. Since he was nominally Ken's superior at the office I heard his name mentioned now and then. And I met him once or twice."

"By the way, where *is* the boy friend?"

Jill shrugged a well-moulded shoulder. "Where's the bar?"

"Oh! Maybe you'd better let me take you home after all."

"I know the way. To be frank, Mr. Fletcher, I don't care an awful lot for you."

"That's because you don't know me well. Let me tell you about myself and—"

"Write me a letter, and don't put a stamp on the envelope."

Johnny grimaced. "We're getting nowhere fast. Well, I guess I'll have to confess to the lieutenant, after all."

"Confess?"

"Tell the truth. How I found the body —why we moved it, you know."

"Now don't try anything like that. I hate blackmail in any shape, form or variety."

"Shh!" said Johnny. "People will hear you."

"Johnny," said Sam, "here comes trouble!"

Ken Ballinger was weaving drunkenly through the crowd. A stocky young blonde in a Tuxedo was trying to hold him back but wasn't having very good success.

Ken came up to Sam Cragg and glared owlishly at him. "I saw it and I still don't believe it. That chain was a phoney."

"Sure," said Sam easily. "So was the telephone book."

"Ken!" exclaimed Jill. "You're drunk again."

"I am like ducks. This ginzo hit me when I wasn't looking this afternoon and I owe him something."

Sam yawned. "Come around sometime when you grow up."

"You baboon!" said Ken thickly. He made a sudden swing for Sam's face. The latter ducked it easily, reached out and wrapped his arms about Ken. He picked him up and stooping low laid Ken across his knees. Then holding him securely with one hand he administered something Ken Ballinger had probably not had for twenty years—an old-fashioned spanking. And he didn't spare him.

The whacks across the seat of the trousers made considerable noise and before Sam finished half the people in the room were watching. Then Sam lifted Ken to his feet and pushed him against the wall.

Ken, sobbing from either pain or drunken rage, swung wildly with both fists, but none of the blows landed.

"Let it go, Sammy," Johnny ordered sharply.

"Okay," said Sam and stepped back swiftly. Ken fell forward on his face. Jill brushed past Johnny Fletcher and dropped to her knees. She turned up her face and it was white with suppressed anger.

"I think you'd better go," she said. "And take your—your gorilla with you."

"That's you, Sam," said Johnny cheerfully. "Come on."

Silently people gave way and made a lane. As they reached the door, someone called to Johnny. "Say!"

He turned. It was the stocky blonde. "I just wanted to say that it was Ken's fault. He's been looking for trouble all day. He left the office at noon with a chip on his shoulder." The blonde nodded. "Like to have you come to the office tomorrow. Want to talk to you about modeling."

"No," Sam Cragg snapped.

"You mean because of Ken? He'll be over it by tomorrow. *Blockhead* can afford to pay for a good model. Give me a buzz. My name's Jim Wilder."

"We may do that little thing," said Johnny.

AS THEY descended the flight of stairs to the twentieth floor, Sam Cragg muttered. "Next guy mentions Blockhead to me gets a poke in the nose. I was never so humiliated in my life."

Johnny chuckled. "But I sold thirty-two books. That's sixty-four dollars. Not bad for an evening's work."

Sam sighed. "Some day I'm going to get heart failure, the stuff you pull. I thought sure we'd get kicked out."

"Well, we did finally. But that was because of your rough stuff."

"With that Ken? He couldn't take a hint."

"Maybe he'll try for you again tomorrow. He lives at the hotel, you know. Mmm, so does the Jill girl. A very nice number."

"Huh? Say, you're not falling—"

"Me?" scoffed Johnny. "Do I ever fall for dames?"

"Yes!"

The elevator door opened and Johnny was spared replying to that. Outside he signaled a cab and when they were in began talking about trivial things.

It was after eleven when they reached the hotel. Mr. Peabody was behind the desk, filing his fingernails. He held up his hand as Johnny and Sam started toward the elevator.

"Mr. Fletcher, I've been thinking about all this and I've decided to insist upon the house rules being followed to the exact spirit, rather than the letter."

"What does that mean in English?"

"Your personal property isn't worth five dollars. A couple of shirts, some socks—"

"You been snooping in our room?" Johnny snapped.

"I have a right, Mr. Fletcher. As manager of this hotel."

"Look," said Johnny, "I'm getting awfully tired of you asking for the room rent, so—". Johnny pulled a handful of crumpled bills from his pocket "—so I'm going to pay that week's rent in advance. Twelve dollars."

Mr. Peabody's eyes threatened to bulge from his head as he stared at the money. Johnny chuckled wickedly. "I'll bet you thought I didn't have the money and you expected to stick a French key into our lock. Eh? Well, there it is—and a receipt, if you please. You don't trust me, I don't trust you. So we understand each other."

Mr. Peabody wrote out a receipt, but he was not happy about it.

Johnny and Sam rode up to the eighth floor. The moment they had entered their room, Johnny went to the telephone. "Hello, operator," he said. "I'd like to have a pitcher of ice water—and have Eddie Miller bring it. Thank you!"

He hung up to meet Sam's frowning face.

"Ice water, Johnny?"

"I'm thirsty."

"I could do with a cold bottle of beer."

"Ice water will be better for you. I don't want you to get woozy."

"After the evening I've had I'm entitled to something," Sam said.

"The evening isn't over yet."

"What do you mean, Johnny?" There was alarm in Sam's tone. "You're not going to—stick out your neck again?"

There was a soft tapping on the door and Eddie Miller's voice came through the panels.

"Ice water, Mr. Fletcher."

"Come in!"

Eddie came in carrying a pitcher. "Ice water, Mr. Fletcher?" he asked, with his tongue in his cheek.

"Ice water, Eddie." Johnny smiled pleasantly and took the handful of bills from his pocket. Eddie Miller stared, fascinated. Johnny disengaged a dollar bill, examined it and added another.

He handed the money to Eddie. "You're a good kid, Eddie. I like you."

Eddie stowed the bills in his pockets. "You musta hit the jackpot, Mr. Fletcher."

"I did, practically. And I'm going to keep on hitting it now—"

"Two bucks for ice water!" Sam exploded.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Sam," Johnny chided. "Eddie knows it isn't for the ice water. It's just because he's done us some turns at times and I want to show my appreciation."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Fletcher. Any time I can do anything for you—"

"As a matter of fact, Eddie, you could do me a little favor right now."

"Oh-oh! What is it?"

"Oh, I guess it isn't important. Skip it, Eddie. You might get in a jam and I wouldn't want you to lose your job. *You* know I wouldn't really touch anything, but if that boss of yours got wind he'd say I was robbing the room."

"A room, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Yeah, I just thought I'd like to take a quick peek into a room. I've got a little clue I'd like to investigate."

"A clue? You're working on the murder case? Cripes, that sounds interesting, but—ah, what room was you wanting to look into?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. You couldn't get the key for me anyway, could you?"

"The key? Well, uh, mm, you see, I got a passkey. Fits any door in the house. Uh, just a key I happened to have and one day I discovered it was a duplicate of the house passkey."

"Of course, Eddie. I understand. You wouldn't deliberately swipe the house passkey and have a duplicate made—mmm, let's see this key, Eddie."

Eddie took it from his pocket. "What room you figuring on looking into?"

"The one right above this; it's right next to the linen closet where they, well, you know."

"Yeah, sure. I looked it up. Room 921's occupied by a bird named Holcomb. The register says he's from Terra Haute, Indiana, and he might be at that. An old geezer. But look, Mr. Fletcher, you'll be —uh, careful?"

"I give you my word and I'm not going to forget this little favor. And thanks for the ice water!"

"You're welcome, Mr. Fletcher."

EDDIE MILLER frowned and hesitated, but Johnny gave him no encouragement and the bellboy reluctantly left the room. Johnny put his finger to his lips and waited a couple of minutes. Then he went to the door and peered out cautiously.

"You'd better stay here, Sam. I'll be back in ten minutes."

"I'll be holding my breath."

Johnny winked and slipped out of the room. But instead of climbing to the ninth floor he went quickly down to the seventh and approached the door of Room 721. A peek through the keyhole showed him that the room was dark and he unlocked the door and went in. He locked the door on the inside, then he switched on the light.

The trunk still stood in the corner. Johnny went to it and lifted the lid. The trunk was empty. He leaned far into it and struck a match. By its light he examined the interior closely. He exclaimed in chagrin. The bottom of the trunk was wet to his touch. It had been washed thoroughly and the water soaking into the lining had not yet dried completely.

"So she didn't know!" he muttered. He closed the trunk and went to the clothes closet. It was full of clothing and a drawing stand on which was screwed a drawing board. There was a rough pencil sketch tacked on the board—a caricature, but Johnny's eyes traveled back to it after passing it once.

He chuckled. It was a caricature of himself, his features made angular, his nose more prominent than it actually was. But quite recognizable. With a mere curved line or two, Jill Thayer had put a bold look into the caricature's eyes that gave the impression that Johnny was pretty much of a sly wolf.

He closed the closet door and went to the chiffonier. For the first time he no-

ticed now that the furnishings were not an exact duplicate of those in his own room. Beside the chiffonier stood a cabinet. He opened it and discovered that most of Jill's drawing supplies were here. There were stacks of pencil and drybrush drawings, even a few in crayon. There was also a huge stack of magazines. Johnny took one out and began leafing through it. After a moment he came upon a printed cartoon, signed: Jill Thayer. It was a good cartoon and produced a chuckle from Johnny. The magazine was a large circulation weekly.

He moved from the cabinet to the hotel desk and noted that a portable typewriter in its case stood underneath.

He pulled open the large drawer of the desk and exclaimed as he saw a packet of letters, held together with a thick rubber-band. He scooped up the bundle and then a click behind him caused him to whirl guiltily.

He winced as he saw the door opening. But the person who came into the room holding a key was not the one he had expected.

It was a man, a tall slender young man of about twenty-five. He was as aston-

ished to see Johnny as the latter was to see the masculine intruder.

"What the—" the man exclaimed.

"You've got the wrong room, Mister," Johnny said quickly. Behind his back he dropped the packet of letters into the open desk drawer.

The newcomer blinked, then shot a quick glance at the number on the door just a few inches from his face. A scowl came to his face.

"*You've* got the wrong room. What the devil are you doing here?"

"What?" exclaimed Johnny. "I guess I ought to know my own room. I checked in this afternoon. See!" He thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out the key of Room 821. He held up the tag. "Room 821, see?"

"This is Room 721—"

"You're crazy," Johnny cried.

The other tapped the door. "Look for yourself."

Johnny went forward and peered at the door. "Well, I'll be damned! It *is* seven twenty-one. But gee, it's exactly like my own room and I even have a trunk like that one. I'll be a monkey's uncle. *Excuse me,* Mister. I was out to a movie and just came in. The elevator man left me off a floor too soon, and I stepped into *your* room."

THE man at the door did not rise to that bait. He grunted and stepped to one side so Johnny could walk past him. But Johnny lingered. "This is one of those embarrassing moments, I guess, Mister—er—? By the way, my name's Fletcher."

"So?"

"Nothing. Cripes, you about scared the life out of me, coming in like that. I'm kinda skittish anyway. You know—what happened in the hotel today." He paused. "The murder, I mean."

"Things happen in hotels right along. Good night."

"Good night," said Johnny. "And—sorry."

"G'night!"

Johnny left and climbed halfway up to the eight floor. Then he paused. It was a long minute before the door of Room 721 finally closed and then Johnny heard footsteps slither on the hall carpeting. The man had come out of Room 721, was going

away from the room, down the hall, past the elevators.

Johnny tiptoed quickly to the seventh floor level and crouching peered into the hallway. At the end, where a short hall led to the right from the main corridor, the tall young man stopped at a door and began putting a key into the lock. He unlocked the door and went in.

Johnny counted up to fifty, then stepped into the corridor and walked as softly as he could, until he could see the number on the door. It was 717. He nodded and turning, headed back for the stairs.

He encountered Sam Cragg in the upper corridor, as jittery as a cat with nine kittens. "Gee, Johnny!" he breathed hoarsely.

Johnny went into their room and Sam followed. "You were gone fifteen minutes, Johnny."

Johnny shook his head sadly. "I've learned something, and it hurts."

"Huh?"

"I've learned," Johnny said, "that the more beautiful they are the more they lie."

VI

THE sun shining on Johnny Fletcher's face wakened him in the morning. He rolled over lazily and looked out of the window to the roof of the adjoining building, which came just to the level of the eighth floor of the 45th Street Hotel.

A fat woman was hanging out washing on the roof. Such early morning energy on the part of others almost made him uncomfortable. He got out of bed and pulled down the window shade, then went to the telephone stand between the beds and looked at the dollar watch that was ticking noisily. It was eight-thirty.

Johnny exclaimed and slapped Sam Cragg. Sam grunted and pulled the blanket higher over his head. Johnny hit him again.

"Rise and shine, Blockhead!"

Sam threw back the blanket. "Who said that?" he snarled, then opened his eyes and recognized Johnny. "What's the matter?"

"Up! This is a new day and there are things to do. The things we should have done yesterday."

Sam groaned. "I thought I was just having a nightmare, but now I remember. I wish it had been a nightmare."

Johnny chuckled and went to the bathroom. He took a shower and when he came out, Eddie Miller was knocking on the door. "Telegram, Mr. Fletcher!"

"Collect or prepaid?"

Eddie Miller mumbled an unintelligible reply, but Johnny opened the door and let him in. His hands were empty.

"I just said telegram in case anyone was prowling around," Eddie grinned. "I came to get the key."

"What key?"

"You know, the passkey."

"You mean you carry around a passkey to all the rooms? Is it customary for bellboys in hotels to have one?"

"Aw, cut it out, Mr. Fletcher. I took a chance letting you have it."

"Okay, Eddie. Here it is. But tell me something. What's the name of the party in Room 717?"

"Seven, seventeen? Umm, isn't that a tall, young fellow about twenty-five?"

"That's right. Who is he?"

"Name's Johnson. Thomas Johnson. He's down on the book as coming from Iowa. I forget the name of the town. Some whistle stop like Shell Rock or Shell Creek. Why are you interested in him?"

"Why are *you* interested in him? Or do you check up on all the guests?"

"Just the permanent. Johnson's been here two weeks and don't seem to be doing much of anything. He's around most of the time. You know what that means?"

"What?"

"He'll fall a week behind in his rent, then another. And Peabody will slip him the French key—lock him out."

"Hasn't he got any friends?"

"I haven't seen him with any. He goes out every day for a couple of hours, but most of the time he just stays here in his room. Don't seem natural for a guy from Iowa, in the big town. But look, Mr. Fletcher, you're barking up the wrong tree if you're connecting him with the guy who was bumped here yesterday."

"Oh, I wasn't interested in him in that connection at all."

"No?"

"No, Eddie. Thanks a lot for the use of your key."

"You're welcome. Peabody——"

Eddie stopped as a pile driver smashed repeatedly against the thin panels of the door.

"Wake up, Fletcher!" boomed the voice of Lieutenant Madigan.

Johnny groaned. "Before breakfast! Come in, flatfoot!"

Lieutenant Madigan slammed open the

door and sidestepped Eddie Miller's swift exit.

"Hi, Fletcher," Madigan said, in great humor. "And Blockhead!"

"I punched a cop in the nose for calling me less than that," Sam Cragg snapped.

"I'm trembling, Cragg. I may take you up on that, down at Headquarters some time."

"I had a good night's sleep, Madigan," Johnny said, "and now I'm hungry. So cut short whatever nonsense brought you here."

"The taxpayers don't think murder is nonsense. I thought I'd come in and give you a chance to spill whatever's on your mind."

"There's nothing on my mind, Madigan." Johnny gave the detective a suspicious glance. "Why should there be?"

"Oh, I was just putting some coincidences together, that's all. The coincidence of the title of one of your books being on Hal Soderstrom's hand. And your showing up at the Royce party."

"We were hired to put on a show."

"By Harry Dale? When did he hire you?"

"Before the party—naturally. As a matter of fact, we had a little brush with Harry Hale and Ken Ballinger in the afternoon. We stopped in at Dinky Maguire's up the street for a glass of beer and Hal was crying in his beer. He thought Sam shoved him and tried to climb Sam's frame. Sam brushed him off and Hale got the idea that Sam had some moxie so later when we met him he made that proposition."

"Where did this 'later' take place?"

"Down in the cocktail lounge."

"Who all was present?"

"Me and Sam, Harry Hale and Ken Ballinger."

"Anyone else?"

Johnny frowned. "Jill Thayer, the cartoonist."

"Ah yes, she lives here at the hotel."

"So does Ken Ballinger."

"That's right. Ballinger introduced you to Miss Thayer, I suppose?"

"What're you trying to do, Madigan?" Johnny snapped testily. "You pumped that whole crew last night, now you're springing stuff on me, trying to catch me. No, Ballinger didn't introduce me to the girl. I met her here at the hotel."

"How?"

"Am I sixty-seven years old? Have I got false teeth and a wig? Is Jill Thayer an

old hag? I got off the wrong floor one time and thought her room was this one—"

"What do you mean, one time? You only checked in here yesterday."

"It was yesterday that happened."

"And before evening you were having a couple of drinks with her in the cocktail lounge."

"The place has a license to sell drinks."

"So it has. Mind if I do some thinking out loud, Fletcher?"

"Yes, I mind. I mind your busting in here, but it doesn't do me any good, does it?"

"No. So I'll just talk. This Hal Soderstrom was business manager of *Blockhead the Strong Man,* a very cushy job I understand. So he comes here to the 45th Street Hotel and gets his head bashed in and is stuffed into a linen closet, right above the room in which you're holding up. On his hand is a reverse printing of the title of a book you keep in your trunk—but you deny that the body was ever near one of your books."

"Have you got the book to prove it was?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Lieutenant Madigan whistled. The door of the room opened and Detective Fox came in. He carried a small newspaper-wrapped-parcel. One look at it and a shudder shook Johnny.

Lieutenant Madigan gave him a cat-and-mouse look. "Know what's in the package, Fletcher?"

"N-no."

"Open it, Foxie!"

Detective Fox removed the newspaper from the package revealing a towel. He unfolded the towel carefully and finally exposed three copies of "Every Man a Samson." He handled them gingerly by the edges.

"You never saw those before?" Madigan asked. "I got them down in the checkroom. I got to thinking what I would do if I was stuck with something like that—and I figured I'd check the package for a few days. So I stopped at the checkroom on my way in and sure enough there was a package there, checked by Mr. Fletcher of Room 821."

"It's a lie," Johnny said hoarsely. "I didn't check that package."

"There're some fingerprints on the book," Detective Fox said.

"Fine, Foxie," purred Madigan. "That's just fine. If they match up with Mr. Fletcher, I think, mmm, we may have a little room down at Headquarters."

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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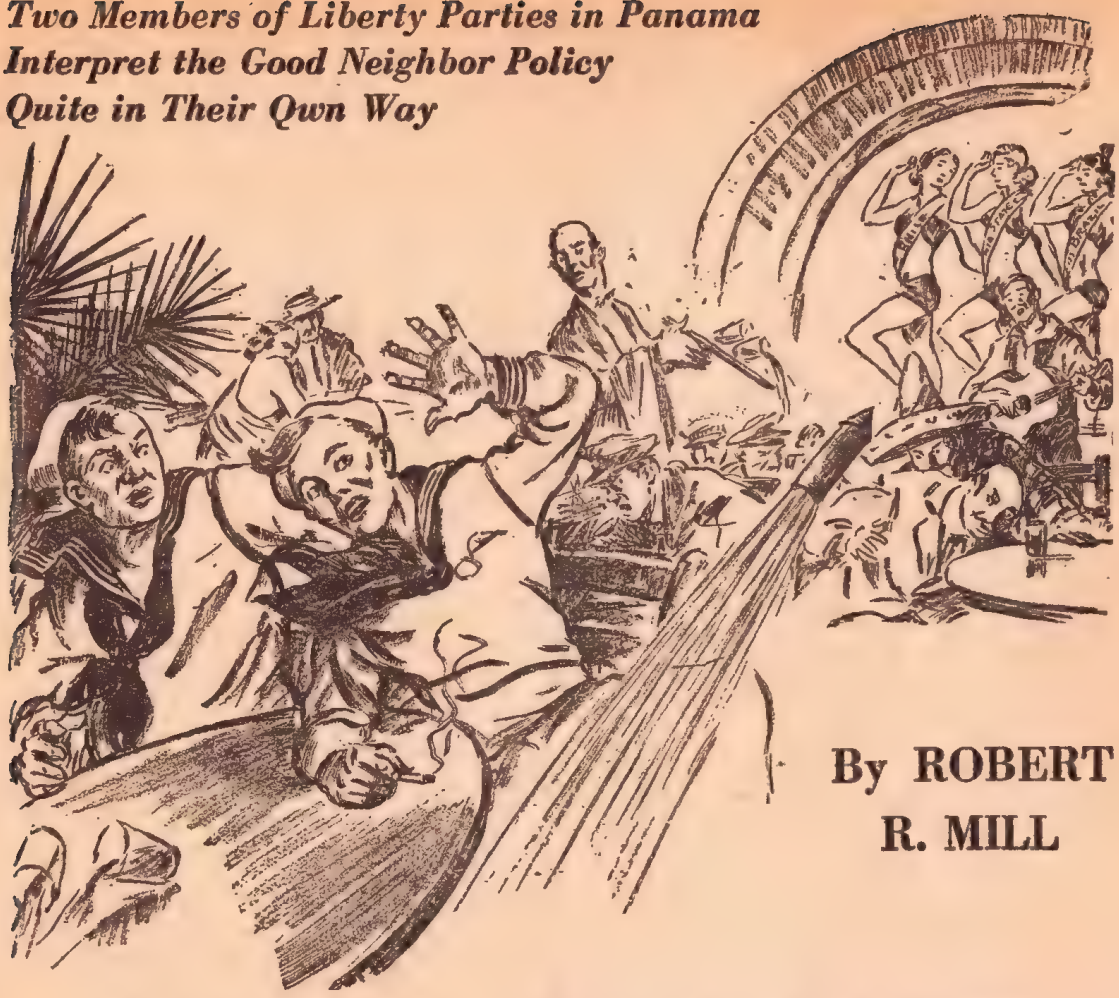
DEPT. 175-H CHICAGO, ILL.

Two Members of Liberty Parties in Panama Interpret the Good Neighbor Policy Quite in Their Own Way



By ROBERT R. MILL

AMBASSADORS AT LARGE

VARIOUS skippers in the destroyer forces of the United States Navy would consider themselves fortunate if their crew included one Thomas Porter, a tall rangy able seaman, whose red thatch has earned him the name, "Brick."

Others among the youthful lieutenant commanders guiding the destinies of our "tin cans" would go on record in favor of one Richard Howard, also regarded as an able seaman, whose plump owlish-looking face is responsible for the designation, "Prof."

Both schools of thought are united upon one point; no two and one-half striper in his right mind would sign on both gentlemen as members of the same ship's company. It has been tried, but not for long, and only once.

But even lieutenant commanders bow to fate and the Republic of Panama; so Messrs. Porter and Howard, both members of liberty parties from destroyers that were awaiting daylight to begin the transit of the Panama Canal, met in one of the many thirst parlors that Panama City provides for soldiers, sailors, marines, tourists and other unfortunates.

Mr. Porter had certain pithy remarks to make regarding the iniquities of the skipper of the U.S.S. *Gilpin.* Mr. Howard went on record concerning the shortcomings of the youth who occupied a like post aboard the U.S.S. *Fitch.* This necessary

ritual, which required considerable footwork upon the part of a Panamanian waiter, took time; so it was only when a dusky lady from Columbia performed what the mistress of ceremonies declared to be a dance that the two gentlemen gave their undivided attention to the immediate present.

"She has good legs," Mr. Porter admitted. "But to get a really trim craft you would have to splice on the topside of Lana Turner." He sighed. "That would mean a paint job in order to get things ship-shape."

"It's too hot to work," Mr. Howard pointed out. "And it would be a messy job. Besides, she probably is a spy."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Porter demanded.

Mr. Howard gazed at him sadly.

"Don't you read the papers? This place is full of spies."

Mr. Porter pondered that while he drained a tall glass and accepted a re-fill from the Panamanian waiter.

"Before you issue the orders of the day," he asserted, "I want it entered in the log that I don't want any trouble. The skipper had us up before the mast and read a sermon on the good neighbor policy. He said Panama is a sister republic, and that we are to consider ourselves ambassadors of good will."

"Stow that," Mr. Howard ordered. "We had it too. It's regulation issue." His expression became more owlish. "An ambassador is supposed to serve the best interests of the country he represents."

Mr. Porter, whose complexion was beginning to match his hair, sought strength in another re-fill.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

Mr. Howard adopted his best professorial manner.

"Panama City is filled with Japanese barber shops. Why?"

"I'll bite," said Mr. Porter. "Why?"

Mr. Porter accepted service from the Panamanian gentleman.

"As ambassadors," declared Mr. Howard, "it is our duty to learn the answer to that question." He clapped his hands. "Boy, a check."

The service was prompt. Mr. Howard's eyes became even narrower as he glanced at the total.

"Do you want me to sign a chit for this?" he asked.

The Panamanian was emphatic. He did not.

"They always do in books," Mr. Howard complained, as he led the way to the open air, after having paid in cash.

They found a medium-sized Japanese barber shop in the same block, and climbed into chairs.

"Shave," was the united order.

Two Japanese barbers stared at two faces that had been given clean shaves just a few hours before, shrugged their shoulders in unison and proceeded to apply lather.

"What are you paying for naval secrets?" asked Mr. Porter.

The application of lather continued.

"They don't understand English," Mr. Howard explained. "I'll talk to them." He raised his voice. "We come from Mexican fleet. Know plenty where ships go. How much you pay?"

The barber wiped his hands on a towel, and picked up a razor.

"You want shampoo? Thirty cents."

Mr. Howard answered in the negative, and turned to Mr. Porter:

"We tied up at the wrong anchorage."

MR. PORTER, however, was struggling with an idea, which he was able to put into words only after they had returned to the original base of operations and received considerable attention from the waiter.

"Those babies belong to the union," he declared. "Won't work after hours." A long session with a long glass produced righteous indignation. "I bet their boss would like to know about that."

Mr. Howard raised a point of ethics.

"That would be squealing."

Mr. Porter's indignation mounted as the contents of the glass ebbed.

"It would not. Those birds are supposed to be loyal servants of their government. Would you chew the rag about quitting time if the skipper ordered you to turn out?"

Mr. Howard yielded the point.

"If it is a matter of duty—" he called for the check.

"Four-sixty," said the waiter. "No chit. Cash."

They went into executive session on the sidewalk.

"The Jap consul is the lad to see," Mr. Howard declared.

Mr. Porter's finger indicated the distant waterfront.

"They always hang out near the docks. Let's get under way."

Their course carried them through various streets and alleys and, as was inevitable, across the invisible line that separates Panama from the Canal Zone, and into Balboa. Ahead loomed a uniform that indicated authority.

"Maybe this Spick cop can speak English," Mr. Porter suggested.

"I'll give him a workout," said Mr. Howard. "Hey, Buddy! When you want to talk to the Jap consul, what course do you steer?"

The Canal Zone policeman took a firmer grip upon a large nightstick.

"What was that, sailor?"

Mr. Howard raised his voice as he repeated the question.

"I never want to talk to the Jap consul," declared the policeman.

Mr. Porter's righteous indignation flared anew.

"Another union guy. Won't work after hours. Just like those Jap—"

The policeman walked on, and then turned to deliver a parting shot:

"In another hour you'll be ripe, and then I'll pick you."

A black taxicab driver from Barbados arrived on the scene in time to unwittingly play the role of peacemaker. The policeman, wisely deciding to save his strength for what promised to be a hard night, unbent sufficiently to assist in the loading process.

"Do you speak English?" Mr. Porter asked the driver.

"Sir," came the reply in an Oxford accent, "I am a British object."

"He's all right," declared Mr. Howard. "Talks like that naval reserve ensign from Boston." He waved a hand expansively. "We are ambassadors from the United States. Drive us to the Jap consul."

The cab drove on. The policeman sought a telephone, into which he relayed descriptions of Messrs. Porter and Howard, their claims and their destination. Then he returned to his post, resigned to a long night which would produce more of the same breed.

That explains why an undersized, Spanish-looking individual, who was carried on the rolls of the Canal Zone Police as an undercover man, was lurking in the shadows about the combined residence and office of the Japanese consul when Messrs. Porter and Howard, still convoyed by the gentleman from Barbados, hove into sight.

There had been ample time for the undercover operative to establish a base. The taxi driver's British respect for law had clashed with a Yankee sense of thrift. He had compromised by taking a roundabout route, thereby postponing the payoff beyond the legal time limit for fixed fares, and carrying it well into those delightful hours when the Panamanian law regards each trip as a private transaction between driver and passengers.

Messrs. Porter and Howard had aided his plans by demanding that a halt be made before each thirst parlor. True, there had been a brief moment of dissension when Mr. Porter had suggested passing up the smaller establishments, but Mr. Howard had at once raised a point of order.

"That's discrimination. It isn't neighborly. We got to be neighborly, even if it

means scattering our personality all over the Isthmus of Panama."

They had been very neighborly and their personalities had been well distributed when the hack, an open touring car of ancient vintage, came to a halt before the Japanese consulate. The driver jumped out and threw open the door.

"Yes, sirs; Mr. Ambassadors, your excellencies!"

Messrs. Porter and Howard alighted, and the former beat lustily upon the door of the building. The latter, crossing the sidewalk in more leisurely fashion, stumbled, and saved himself only by grasping what he believed to be a lamppost. The driver, who turned out to be the lamppost, steadied Mr. Howard and stilled his protests.

"You were not tripped, your excellency, Mr. Ambassador."

"Take your word for it," Mr. Howard declared, and added a deserved word of praise. "They have good lampposts here."

"Sir, your excellency," said the driver. "I am a British object, not a lamppost."

"That brings him under the Lease-Lend Act," Mr. Porter ruled, at the same time continuing his attack on the door. "When this hack wears out, we will buy him a new one."

THE door was opened cautiously by a serious looking, moon-faced Japanese, clad in an old-fashioned nightshirt.

"Yes?" He spoke in Spanish.

Mr. Howard obligingly acted as interpreter, by shouting:

"We want Jap consul. 'Portant."

"Yes." This time in English.

"Confidential."

The Japanese made a quick decision. Years in the service of the Land of the Rising Sun had taught him that strange gifts often came in strange guises.

"You come in," he invited.

Messrs. Porter and Howard accepted the invitation, and found themselves in a dimly-lighted office.

Mr. Porter took over the duties of spokesman.

"We want to sell some Naval secrets. We propositioned one of your men but he wouldn't listen because the whistle had blown. That's no way to act. We want to make a complaint."

The Japanese made a diagnosis. He was aided by a residence of three years in an American college town and a certain aroma that floated about his two visitors. The ghost of a twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"I am afraid you gentlemen have been reading bad books. Your country and my country are not at war. However, I appreciate your very great kindness."

The door opened. The Japanese bowed. Messrs. Porter and Howard bowed. The door closed, and the two visiting delegates found themselves in the street, where they were greeted enthusiastically by the gentleman from Barbados.

"I have tarried, your excellencies, Mr. Ambassadors."

Mr. Porter brushed him aside.

"Are we at war with Japan?" he demanded.

"I wouldn't know," Mr. Howard admitted. "Haven't seen today's paper. But that Jap must have a radio."

Mr. Porter returned to an earlier line of thought:

"That stuff he handed us is just bilge water. He's another one of those short hours babies."

Mr. Howard brightened visibly, and reached for his blouse.

"Shall we put out a landing party?"

"Stow that!" Mr. Porter ordered, and turned to the driver. "What's your name?"

"Henry Cabot Worthington, sirs, your excellencies, Mr. Ambassadors."

"Very good, Hank," Mr. Porter declared. "Drive us to the Japanese minister."

Their start was somewhat delayed by Mr. Howard, who decided he would obtain more air by riding astride the hood of the car, but eventually they got under way with both gentlemen in the rear seat.

"I'll get these babies straightened out," Mr. Porter warned, "even if I have to carry the case to the Mikado."

They left behind them an undercover agent, whose grasp of the proceedings was as follows:

Two American sailors had called on the Japanese consul. They had been received cordially. They had been bowed out in like manner, and thanked for their visit. They now were on their way to visit the Japanese minister.

All this he confided into the nearest telephone, whereupon a lieutenant of the Canal Zone Police, who worked in plain clothes, went into action. He called a major in the United States Army, who was assigned to Intelligence. The major, in turn, called a high official of the police force of Panama, which also serves that country as an army. Thus it was that a small expeditionary force began to converge upon the Japanese legation.

MR. PORTER'S steadily mounting indignation carried the good will party safely past three drinking places but proved unequal to cope with a distant neon sign which depicted the twinkling toes of a dancing girl and spelled out the word, "Alamo."

"Hank."

"Henry Cabot Worthington, sirs, your excellencies, Mr. Ambassadors," the driver corrected him.

"All right. Make a landing at the Alamo."

They made a forced landing one block from the establishment, where a broad-shouldered sailor, who had a large nightstick in his hand and a blue band with the white letters "S.P." on his arm, flagged Mr. Worthington.

"Where the hell do you think you are headed for?"

"Sir, Mr. Admiral, I have the honor of conveying these diplomatic gentlemen to the Alamo."

The sailor surveyed the contents of the hack.

"Yeah? That joint is out of bounds. Scram, or I'll louse up the diplomatic corps with this persuader!"

Mr. Worthington reversed his course, and beat a strategic retreat, which continued south for two blocks, where it was halted by a command from Mr. Porter.

"How are we going to be neighborly if a dumb gob on shore patrol rides herd on us?" he demanded.

"Hullo, babee!" The greeting came from a lady of uncertain years, who was seated in the open front of a one-story shack.

"Hello, grandma!" said Mr. Porter, who then turned his attention to the driver. "It's worth five bucks if you get us to the Alamo."

Mr. Worthington drove east for two blocks. He headed north for three. He changed his course, and ran west for two. Then he dropped anchor before a side door of the resort, a feat which brought tribute from Mr. Howard.

"Good navigating. Can't get a following wind you got to tack." The scene was free of uniforms but precaution was indicated. "Best set the engine room signal at 'Stand by,' Hank."

Mr. Worthington drew upon past experience.

"Yes, sirs, your excellencies, Mr. Ambassadors. I shall permit the motor to remain in motion and I shall be prepared to mash the gas."

They were seated by a polite head waiter. Their order was taken and filled. They remained undisturbed because the hostesses, who doubled in brass as the floor

show, were engaged in a spectacle billed as "A Congress of Nations of the Americas."

Miss Brazil danced to the center of the floor. The band played the national anthem of that country. There was polite applause. Miss Chile fared equally well. Messrs. Porter and Howard, pictures of international good will, applauded impartially. The line moved forward as country after country was saluted. Then Mr. Howard made a discovery.

"Pipe the blonde!" His finger indicated a girl whose hair was dark at the hoots, and whose costume was composed chiefly of an American flag amidships. "She's Miss United States. Got to give her a big hand."

"Got to give her more than that," Mr. Porter ruled. "Greetings from ambassadors to one of their nationals." Previous knowledge caused him to thrust a hand into Mr. Howard's blouse. The hand emerged with a signal rocket, which he placed on the floor.

Mr. Howard attempted a protest.

"Not here. Want it entered on log that—"

"Stow that!" Mr. Porter ordered. "Matter of national prestige."

The faded blonde advanced to the center of the floor. The band struck up its version of the Star Spangled Banner. Mr. Howard applauded wildly. Mr. Porter applied the tip of a lighted cigarette to the fuse of the rocket.

The music subsided. The blonde began a recitation in a treble monotone: "I am Miss Unit—"

"Sssspppsssttt—wisssshhhhh!" went the rocket. It headed for Miss Mexico, who did a split and allowed it to pass. It caromed off the bar and showered sparks on three German "business men" as it launched a rear attack on Miss Cuba, who ducked, thereby endangering Miss Haiti.

A barman blew a blast upon a whistle that dangled conveniently close at hand. Miss Mexico, sobbing hysterically, pulled down the lever of the fire alarm box that hung outside the dressing room. Panamanian policemen, members of shore patrols and military policemen bore down upon the main entrance. Off in the distance the wail of a siren sounded.

The general confusion made it possible for Messrs. Porter and Howard to retire in good order, and unchallenged, through a side door, outside which Mr. Worthington was waiting. The loading was accomplished in record time. Mr. Worthington "mashed the gas." Once more the good will mission was in motion.

Inside, the forces of law and order, swamped with incoherent and conflicting accounts of what had happened, sought the open air with only one bit of tangible information to work upon: two sailors. From Panamanian taxi drivers, jealous of a foreign competitor, came added tidbits regarding Mr. Worthington's hack and the course it had taken. Whereupon the forces of law and order took to wheels and began to roll in the same general direction.

Mr. Worthington, however, was proving his worth. He steered a zig-zag course, which added to the labors of pursuers with a late start who were dependent entirely upon information gleaned along the way, and after a wide detour designed to give the impression the waterfront was his destination, headed for the residential section of Panama City.

So skillful and soothing was Mr. Worthington's piloting that Messrs. Porter and Howard, after profaning the tropical night air with a few snatches from ribald songs, dropped off to sleep.

THEY were awakened forcibly some time later by their helmsman. Mr. Howard, automatically going through the motions of getting out of a hammock, made a bad landing on the floor of the car. Mr. Porter came back to the present by digging his fists in his eyes.

After considerable spadework both gentlemen were able to realize that the car was parked before a large, ornate bungalow,

which was surrounded by a grove of banyan trees. Outwardly the scene was one of beauty, peace, quiet and solitude. In reality the protruding roots of the banyan trees concealed a host that included one lieutenant of the Canal Zone Police, an undercover man and two patrolmen from the same organization, one major in the United States Army Intelligence service, and one colonel and three privates from the Army of Panama. Also to be included in the strength were reinforcements, acting independently, which even now were slowly but surely working their way to the scene of operations.

Mr. Porter rubbed open his second eye and noted with disapproval the gray light that marks the approach of dawn in the tropics. It is a trying time under any circumstances, and Mr. Porter felt far from well.

"Why are we here?" he demanded sourly.

Mr. Worthington, who was determined to remain within speaking distance of money as long as possible, had foreseen this moment and prudently had taken steps to forestall it. He produced a bottle, which he uncorked and handed to Mr. Porter.

A long period during which a gurgling noise was the only sound was interrupted by a command from Mr. Howard:

"Come up for air!"

The bottle changed hands.

Mr. Worthington stood surveying the proceedings with a practiced eye, awaiting the exact moment when it would be well to plant the seed that would sprout into a continuation of what had been profitable festivities. That moment came shortly after Mr. Porter had taken his third turn at the bottle.

"Sirs, your excellencies, Mr. Ambassadors, this is the abode of the Japanese minister."

Mr. Porter reacted well.

"That's right, Hank. Got to file a complaint. Add a buck to your bill for reminding me."

"The Jap's asleep," Mr. Howard objected.

Mr. Porter silenced the objection by handing the bottle to Mr. Howard and demanding, "Do you want to line up before the skipper if you fall down on this detail?"

Mr. Howard, with some aid from the bottle, was able to recognize sound logic when he encountered it.

"We're ambassadors of good will. Got to rise and shine."

They left the car and wove their way along a flower-bordered path that led to the front entrance to the bungalow. They approached the door, and there caution overcame Mr. Howard.

"Maybe we could just leave a note."

"No, sir." Mr. Porter was firm. "This baby has a lot of labor agitators working for him and laying down on the job. How are we going to trap spies if they won't buy naval secrets after hours? Deplorable condition. Got to be remedied. Besides, the note might get lost."

"Not if we left it inside," Mr. Howard pointed out.

Mr. Porter pondered the suggestion, and placed upon it an interpretation quite foreign to the one intended by its maker.

"Good idea. Won't have to get him up. He can take action later. Gimme your gimmick."

There was no answering action so Mr. Porter thrust his hand into the fruitful blouse worn by Mr. Howard and drew forth a tool known to the police by another name. This he proceeded to force into the crack of the door at a point near the lock.

THE forces of law and order tightened their muscles for action, and strained their eyes as they peered toward a particularly large banyan root that shielded the major in Intelligence and the colonel of the Army of Panama. These two gentlemen, however, were deep in an earnest whispered conversation.

Mr. Porter applied force. There came

the snap of splintered wood and the rasp of scraped steel. The fact that the door opened was less a tribute to the efficiency of the tool used than a testimonial to Mr. Porter's strength.

But Mr. Howard was quick to laud his favorite device.

"Good old gimmick. Quick and quiet." His pride overcame his caution. "Let's go."

They entered what appeared to be a large reception room.

Outside, the Panamanian colonel held up a restraining hand to the forces of law and order. Then he and the United States major crept forward and found places of shelter in bougainvillea vines just a short distance from the shattered door. Soon they were joined by the lieutenant of the Canal Zone Police. There was another whispered consultation.

Mr. Worthington, who was allergic to broken doors, decided to get under way and take a chance on picking up his fares when, and if, they reappeared. His forward motion was checked by a Canal Zone policeman, who slipped into the seat beside him and killed the motor.

"Sir, Mr. General," said Mr. Worthington, after he recovered from shock. "I am a British object. Two diplomatic admirals—"

"Can you shut up, or do you need help?" demanded the policeman.

Mr. Worthington ruled in favor of self-service.

Meanwhile, Messrs. Porter and Howard, who had snapped on the lights to aid their explorations, had decided the reception room was too public a place to file their formal complaint regarding the inefficiency of Japanese espionage. A door leading to the rear, which had yielded to persuasion from the gimmick, opened upon what bore the earmarks of the private office of a person of rank.

A LARGE Japanese flag hung upon the wall. The windows were heavily barred. The flat-topped desk bore a miniature Japanese temple carved in jade, but was bare of other equipment.

"More sloppy work," Mr. Porter complained. "Why don't they issue paper?" His roving glance came to rest upon steel files in one corner of the room. "Be paper in them. Gimme your gimmick."

Once more Mr. Howard parted with his prized possession. This, compared with the doors, was a man-size task. It took considerable pounding from a ham-like fist to get the blade of the tool into a position where force could be applied. Then the combined pulling power of both gentlemen had to be brought into play before inorganic objects yielded to brawn combined with befuddled intellect.

When the top drawer had been forced, Mr. Porter calmly appropriated a sheaf of documents and seated himself at the desk.

"What'll we say?" he demanded.

Mr. Howard pondered.

"He's a minister. That means he rates the title, 'reverend.' Start it off, 'Dear Rev.' "

Mr. Porter produced a pencil and began to write with a somewhat shaky hand. Mr. Howard stood behind him, reading over his shoulder, and indicating by his expression that he did not approve the resulting product. Neither gentleman was aware that a rear door opened quietly.

"Raise your hands!"

They turned to confront a scowling Japanese, clad in a richly embroidered kimono, who held an ugly-looking automatic in his hand. Mr. Howard swallowed hastily. All his earlier misgivings returned in exaggerated form. Mr. Porter, however, smiled his brightest.

"Are you the Japanese minister?"

"Keep your hands raised," ordered the Japanese.

The Panama police colonel chose this minute to enter by the door leading to the front reception room. He was courteous, brisk and efficient, and he spoke Castilian Spanish:

"I see we are in time, your excellency. That is good."

The major in Intelligence and the Canal Zone police official entered the room. The Panamanian did the honors, in English:

"This is His Excellency, Senor Haruoka, acting Japanese minister. The gentleman he succeeded was recalled when his country had a change of government. Senor Haruoka, who had a roving commission in Central America, took over."

Messrs. Porter and Howard, badly shaken by the turn of events, spotted a West Point class ring on the hand of one of the new arrivals, and resigned themselves to the worst.

The Panamanian bowed.

"Excellency, may I present Major Burns, of the United States Army, and Lieutenant Craddock, of the Canal Zone Police?"

The Japanese spoke in twangy English.

"Gross violation of diplomatic immunity. The legation is sacred as soil of Japan. My country shall hear of this."

The Panamanian's bow was more profound.

"Exactly, Excellency. A gross violation by these miscreants." He favored Messrs. Porter and Howard with a withering glance. "By good chance we were in time to prevent it. We had information this crime would be attempted. We hastened to protect the legation of a friendly nation. Major Burns and Lieutenant Craddock accompanied me because we had word two of their nationals were involved."

The face of the Japanese was sphinx-like.

"Gross violation," he repeated. "Panama must be prepared—"

"But the United States is the offending party," declared Major Burns. "Two of our sailors have committed a grave crime." He turned to the Panamanian. "If Panama will yield her claims, Colonel Arosamena, we will deal with these two men."

"Panama yields," said Colonel Arosamena.

A touch of steel crept into Major Burns' voice:

"If Your Excellency will have the goodness to put aside that revolver—"

FOR a long moment the two men fought a duel with their eyes. Then the Japanese placed the weapon on the desk. Colonel Arosamena pocketed it.

Lieutenant Craddock placed capable hands upon Messrs. Porter and Howard, whereupon the former, feeling that explanations were long overdue, addressed himself to the highest authority:

"If it please the major—"

"That will do, sailor," said Major Burns.

Lieutenant Craddock and the Messrs. Porter and Howard made a hasty exit. Outside, they were loaded efficiently, but hardly tenderly, into Mr. Worthington's hack. Mr. Craddock sniffed the early morning air.

"Don't strike any matches near their mouths," he warned.

"If it please the Lieutenant—" Mr. Porter began.

"It's not my brand," declared Mr. Craddock. "Drive to the Balboa police station."

"Yes, sir, your excellency, Mr. General," said Mr. Henry Cabot Worthington. "I am a British object, but I consider it an honor to be in the service of an American police general."

"You'll board with us long enough to

take out your first papers," Mr. Craddock promised.

Back in the legation, Major Burns addressed the Japanese.

"We wish to end this intrusion as soon as possible. If Your Excellency will dress and accompany us to the police station—"

"That is arrest!" declared the Japanese. "You're creating grave international situation."

Major Burns' eyebrows went up.

"Nothing was said about arrest. We need your testimony in order to punish the two men who have violated the legation." He glanced at a wristwatch. "You have five minutes to dress. Colonel Arosamena will attend you."

"With pleasure," murmured Colonel Arosamena.

"Sergeant Betters!" Major Burns called to a Canal Zone policeman outside. "Have your men load these files. We shall need them as evidence."

Mr. Haruoka lost every vestige of Oriental calm.

"That is an act of war! That is—"

"It is a necessary act in order to punish two men who have committed a grave crime against your excellency," Major Burns corrected him. "Two of the five minutes have elapsed. Is Your Excellency a fast dresser?"

MESSRS. Porter and Howard sat alone in the quiet office. They were sick, repentant and apprehensive. The fact that the U.S.S. *Gilpin* and the U.S.S. *Fitch* had sailed without them—ordinarily a cause for grave alarm—was the least of their worries.

Mr. Howard attempted a mild protest:

"I said that I wanted an entry on the log—"

"Taking a powder?" asked Mr. Porter.

Mr. Howard waxed justly indignant.

"I'll have just as much interest in what the judge says as you will. And these Canal Zone judges are tough babies. Very careless with other people's time."

"Don't talk about judges and time," Mr. Porter ordered.

Major Burns, grave of face, entered the room and seated slowly himself behind a desk.

"Quite aside from the international complications," he began, "there is the little matter of a charge of attempted burglary. The Panamanian police have waived the rocket deal. They feel that by the time you are free to face them that the complaining witnesses will be dead." He lighted a cigarette. "We have a rough idea of what it is all about from what we overheard and from what the British object told us, but just as a matter of idle curiosity, whatever made you think you could get away with it?"

There was stark despair in Mr. Porter's shrug of the shoulders.

"It was just one of those things, sir."

"Yes, sir," came the contribution from Mr. Howard, "it seemed like a good idea at the time. Has the major ever—"

"We won't go into that," Major Burns ruled.

There was a long period of silence, during which Messrs. Porter and Howard suffered visibly.

Then Major Burns decided that justice had been served.

"As it so happens, there are some extenuating circumstances. We have been chasing Mr. Haruoka all over Central America. He hid behind diplomatic immunity, and took over all the dirty work his departed German and Italian friends had started. And he was an able worker."

The officer gazed out the window.

"Your ships are just passing through the Canal."

Additional pangs of remorse swept over Messrs. Porter and Howard.

"We put interpreters to work on those files," Major Burns continued, "and they were very interesting. Had a list of Panamanian officials on the Japanese payroll. We also found a roster of their undercover agents all over Central America. And

they had maps showing some fine landing fields in Columbia and Costa Rica. Not a bad haul."

Major Burns yawned.

"But that doesn't condone burglary."

Messrs. Porter and Howard parted company with a brief moment of hope.

Major Burns stood up.

"All right. Time for us to shove off."

They followed him out to the street, where Mr. Worthington dozed behind the wheel of his hack.

"Yes, sir, your excellency, Mr. General." Mr. Worthington favored his erstwhile fares with a scornful glance. "To what destination does your grace desire that I should drive these two sailors?"

"The railroad station," said Major Burns.

At the Panama City station, Mr. Worthington parted with them without sorrow. They were seated in a coach when Mr. Porter ventured a question:

"If it please the major, where are we headed for, sir?"

"For the judge," said Major Burns.

The train got under way.

"After I have turned you over to him in Christobal," Major Burns continued, "I'll feel justified in turning in an official report stating that justice has been done."

There was a long, heavy silence. It continued until after the train had left Miraflores behind. Then Mr. Howard put into words a question that had been dancing through his mind.

"Is this judge particularly tough, sir?"

Major Burns shrugged his shoulders.

"You should know. Your ships will be in Christobal this afternoon. I'm turning you over to your skippers. And may God have mercy on your souls!"

"We'll need it, sir," said Mr. Porter, struggling to keep the elation out of his voice as he added a heartfelt, "And God bless the major!"

Hashknife Hartley
and Sleepy Stevens

—back in the next issue in a long story. Tuttle at his best; Hashknife at his spookiest; Sleepy at his nimblest.

THE VALLEY OF VANISHING HERDS

SHORT STORIES for Jan. 10th — out Dec. 25th

Born to Battle

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Rule One for Sheriffs," etc.

THE shot came from a mile away up on the ridge. At the sound of it the raucous, challenging bellow died abruptly to a gurgle in Old Cimarron's huge throat. Two hundred yards away down in the willows, the red white-faced bull continued to paw wrathful dirt over his back, his deep, low rumble of fight talk uninterrupted. Raised among men, handled, driven, winter-fed and cared for by them since calfhood, the distant crack of a rifle, even with all its whiplash of echoes back and forth across the canyon, was just another man-sound and of no concern to him.

But to the old dun longhorn just emerging from an aspen thicket on his way to join battle with this newcomer in the meadow, all man-sounds were cause for fear, most of all a shot. For in the years that Old Cimarron had roamed these mountains, wild and wary as a wolf, many a rider had thrown hasty lead at the wild bull's dull dun shape as it shuttled swiftly away through the timber, and not a little of it had burned him.

At the second shot, though no bullet touched him, Old Cimarron's great scarred head swung high. With the speed and grace of a deer, he vanished back into the aspens. Rebooting his .30-30 up on the opposite ridge, Mike McVey felt only slight satisfaction at the result of his shots. Hearing the fight-talk of the two bulls down in the canyon, McVey had recognized the hoarse threat of Old Cimarron's challenge and feared that the battle might start before he had time to get down there by the long roundabout trail made necessary by an intervening rim of cliffs.

In such a fight, he knew, the new, short-legged, valuable young Hereford bull brought here to the Beaver only a few days ago, wouldn't stand a chance. Already, within the past year, Old Cimarron had killed one such young whiteface and crippled another so badly he had to be shot. McVey had risked bringing this one in only because from the DW range across the Big Mountain had come a report that Dudge Whitehall had shot and killed Old Cimarron more than a month ago. McVey's own failure to pick up the wild bull's sign anywhere for the past three weeks had convinced him the report

was true. But evidently it wasn't, for he knew that wild hoarse bellow and he was sure, even at such a distance, that the animal he shot at was Old Cimarron.

"The danged ol' bogger!" he growled to himself, hurrying down the trail. "Ain't there no way to git rid of him a-tall?"

At that distance he had not expected to hit the big longhorn, but that the shots had spooked him away, for the moment at least, was verified by the gradual diminishing of the white-faced bull's fight-talk drifting up to him through the timber. Kicking his pony down the steep switchbacks of the trail at a gut-jolting joggle, Mike McVey made up his mind. With the moisture of this fast-melting late spring snow to track by, he told himself, he would get on Old Cimarron's trail, track him down and shoot him, this time, if it took a week. Then finally this mountain range would be usable for good grade Hereford cattle, with short-legged, broad-rumped bulls free of the menace of defeat and sudden death at the horns of this wild old outlaw.

DESPITE the firmness of his resolve to get it done, ridding these hills of their most famous—and infamous—denizen was not a job that mountain-bred Mike McVey could feel any genuine hanker for. Getting a sure-death shot at Old Cimarron would not be easy, and he would not risk any other kind. But in forty odd years of horseback mountaineering, he had become accustomed to jobs that were not easy. What bothered him was deeper inside, a reluctance that was somehow akin to his never spoken feeling for these mountains whose wild freedom, so far at least, had escaped the modern infringement of road and wheel.

Several years ago he had almost shot a man for trying to do the very job he had now set out to do himself. Until that encounter, he and Dudge Whitehall, whose summer range lay just west over the Big Mountain, had been friends, often hunting, camping, and working cattle together.

Ten years ago Mike McVey, in branding, had picked out the rangiest, wildest, kickingest, fightingest calf of that year's crop and left him a bull. On his side of Big Mountain Dudge Whitehall had done the same. At the time it seemed like a good idea, for that was before the notion of making more money by raising meaty, docile whitefaces had taken hold in these mountains. McVey's cattle, Dudge White-

Born to Battle, Smarter'n a Wolf—but What the Market Demanded Was Not Fighters, but Good Beef Cattle

hall's cattle, everybody's cattle were just cattle—mongrel stock with a strong, predominating strain of longhorn brought from Texas by the earliest settlers; long tailed, long shanked, long backed, long horned critters, high headed as deer and hardy as wolves; wild, spooky animals kept under control mainly by the magic of salt, for which the complete sweetness of mountain grasses gave them an insatiable appetite.

Above all they were fighters. Instead of selecting bulls with a view to the number and quality of sirloin steaks likely to grow on their offspring, mountaineer ranchers made it a matter of pride to own fighters. Rivalry as to whose bull could lick whose was keen—but friendly—and some of the meetings between bulls from adjoining ranges were classics of gory battle.

"Dudge," said Mike McVey one day when his neighbor from across Big Mountain happened to ride up where he had "swooked" together a bunch of his wildies, with the salt call, "you see that dun yearlin' yonder?" He pointed to a young bull thrashing a willow clump at the far edge of the meadow. "Time he's growed he'll whup ary bull in the mountains. Look at the height of them shoulders!"

"Like hell!" grinned Dudge Whitehall. "If ever that scrub of yours gits over bawlin' tenor an' begins puttin' out shore 'nuff fight-talk you better muzzle him, Mike. For if that rusty roan I'm raisin' overhears him, he'll come bulgin' right acrost the Big Mountain an' whip all the bawl out of him!"

"Want to bet a hoss on that, Dudge?"

Both the bet and the rivalry had been friendly enough at that point. Even when the three-year-old Cimarron, wild as a wolf and growing wilder, first ranged across the Big Mountain and gave battle to Dudge Whitehall's rusty roan of about the same age, there was no hard feeling between the two owners about it. Maybe that was because this first battle, as well as a dozen more periodical encounters from time to time throughout that summer, seemed to end in a draw.

The summer Cimarron was four, a DW cowhand brought a message to Mike McVey from Dudge Whitehall, across the Big Mountain.

"That dun bull of yours sure is a bad influence on the cattle, Mike. Way he high-tails to the brush ever when he spies a rider, he's makin' wildies outa ol' Dudge's cows faster'n we can tame 'em. Dudge says he wish to hell you'd keep him east of the Big Mountain where he belongs."

"That so?" McVey grinned. "You tell Dudge maybe he better stag that Rusty male of his an' git him a bull that can defend his own range!"

Nevertheless he rode over the next day to see what he could do about chousing Cimarron back to his own herd. As it happened, in a glade of the Valle Alamoso he came onto the two lusty four-year-olds in the big middle of a bloody, earth-jarring battle. His impulse was to find a good safe vantage point and watch the battle, but when it appeared that Dudge's Rusty was due to get the worst of it, he reminded himself that here, miles from his own proper range, the dun longhorn was really a lawless intruder. At the risk of his own neck, and with the aid of much shooting in the air and yelling, Mike McVey finally managed to break it up. Once he got them separated the roan bull seemed willing enough to quit. And the wild-eyed way Cimarron took to the timber when he was pried loose from fighting long enough to realize the nearness of a human, made Mike think he, too, had given up the battle. But he hadn't. Hardly had the cowman ridden a hundred yards into the aspen thicket where the longhorn had vanished when the low, rumbling bellow of the dun's fight-talk reached him again from the open park. Once out of sight, Cimarron had circled and come back for more of the same.

Riding back to the glade as fast as knee-bumping trees would permit him, Mike McVey found the two bulls once more going through all the fight preliminaries of pawing, bellowing, snuffing, and bowing their necks. By the sheer luck of the foolhardy, the cowman's swift loop settled over Cimarron's horns. So busy was the dun longhorn sidling up to renew the fight that at first he paid no more attention to the rope than he would a passing blue-jay. But when McVey squalled and shot off his gun to try to make him run for a jerk-down, the dun bull whirled to face him, stood for an instant high headed, switched his tail once, and charged.

Six-gun still in hand, McVey put the hooks to his horse to make him sidestep the charge, then, seeing there was not time enough to make it, took snap aim and fired. With a grunt ol' Cimarron went down in his tracks. The pang of regret that went through the cowman was short lived, for in about the time it takes a toothless man to spit, the dun bull was on his feet again, wobbly, but ready to charge. McVey saw now that his hastily flung bullet had only chipped the bony structure near the base of one horn, well away from the brain, knocking the bull down only as a prize-fighter is knocked down, but not seriously injuring him.

OUT of the corner of his eye he saw something else. Riders were coming into the lower end of the glade: help—if he wanted it. But somehow the man's sympathies were now suddenly all with the bull. With a swiftly drawn knife he cut the rope. Cimarron's wobble-legged charge missed and carried on past him, Mike swung wide from the saddle, grabbed the flying tail, gave it a vicious, kinking twist, let out the wildest squall he could muster, fired off his gun again and sent the panicked bull high-tailing it groggily —but swiftly—into the timber, dragging the rope.

When Dudge Whitehall and one of his hands rode up, McVey was calmly rolling a smoke.

"Howdy, Dudge? That bull of mine you complained of—I jest now started him home."

"Yeah?" Dudge grinned. "What's the matter? Skeered that roan o' mine'll hook him down?"

"Well, I got your message you wanted him choused off this range. Good thing I got here right when I did, too. Another two minutes an' he'd of had that roan scrub belly side up, with a horn in his guts!"

"Like hell! Whyn't you leave 'em fight it out, Mike?"

Mike McVey shrugged.

"Why, next time maybe I will!"

THAT first experience with six-shooter lead not only panicked McVey's dun bull back across Big Mountain. It also increased the wild, wary fear with which he regarded humans.

For two weeks he stayed completely hid out in the dense, loggy thickets at the head of Beaver, wrathful but silent with the misery of his wound, and the annoyance of a dragging rope. Then one day, scouting the hills for sign of him, Mike McVey saw buzzards and ravens circling low, and went to investigate. Instead of the carcass of Old Cimarron, what he found, where she had crawled under a logfall to die, was the horn-ripped body of a cinnamon she-bear that had been indiscreet enough to tackle the sullen bull when he inadvertently grazed between her and her frolicking, irresponsible cubs. Reading sign, McVey could figure out what had happened almost as certainly as if he had witnessed the encounter in person.

"Why, that bear-fightin' ol' booger!" he exclaimed, not without a tinge of pride. "God help him if he ever meets up with a grizzly!"

That was the summer "Old" Cimarron was four. He wintered that year far back

in Deep Canyon with a DW lineback cow and her yellow calf that were now as wild as he was. Come spring, McVey spied him now and again with his other cattle, but always when the rest of the cattle came running and bawling at the sound of McVey's loud-bellowed salt call, the dun bull took to the thickets instead.

Apparently the shock of McVey's bullet that day on the Valle Alamoso had been a lesson to him, for in the two years that followed, even after the rope had rotted off, not once did he range westward again across Big Mountain. But woe to any strange bull that ventured a visit to any of the scattered bunches of McVey's cattle. More than once Mike came upon bloody evidence that Old Cimarron meant to remain king of his own deep canyoned range.

King he was, but not unmolested. The winter he was a long five-year-old, a greenhorn hunter mistook the wild longhorn's dun flank for the flank of the biggest buck in the world, and let fly at it with buck-fevered haste. The next spring McVey, even at a distance, detected a sidling limp of the hindquarters in old Cimarron's run —but no lack of speed.

It was later that summer that the grunting, snuffy sounds of a bullfight brought Mike McVey pussyfooting out to the edge of a cliff rim a hundred yards above a narrow canyon *vega* to see what was going on. What he saw was two huge, high-shouldered bulls, locked head to head in grim, deadly battle, silent but for now and then a windy grunt as one or the other put more steam into the push of already straining muscles. One of the bulls, his long brushy tail rigid with the humped strain of his great back muscles, was Old Cimarron. The opponent that seemed ably to be holding his own was a bobtailed, rusty roan. At last Old Rusty had come over the Big Mountain, and the battle upon which Mike McVey and Dudge had once bet a horse, was on.

"Too bad ol' Dudge ain't here to see that scrub of his git whipped!" Hardly had the thought passed through his mind when, on the opposite ledge across the narrow canyon he saw Dudge Whitehall crouched beside a boulder, rifle in hand, so intent upon the battle below him that he had not seen Mike come out on the opposite rim.

"I'll bet he choused Ol' Rusty over here jest a-purpose for this!" Mike McVey grinned to himself. He puckered his lips to whistle across at the rival bull-owner, but the sound never came out. For at that instant he saw the roan bull down in the meadow give way a couple of steps, drop to one knee, recover himself, then slowly foot by foot, lose ground.

"You got 'im, Cimarron!"

Even as he involuntarily spoke the whispered encouragement, Mike McVey saw Dudge raise his rifle and squint down the barrel, lining the sights on Old Cimarron's great, bulging neck. What Mike did then was pure instinctive impulse. Quicker than a gnat's wink he yanked up his own six-shooter and fired, twice, not at Dudge, but at the rock beside him. It was the quickest way he could think of to forestall the rifle-shot with which Dudge apparently meant to change the tide of battle.

The boom of shots and spang of lead on the rock nearby did not keep Dudge Whitehall from firing. But the startling surprise of it did cause him to jerk the rifle off aim. Down in the meadow the roan bull dropped and lay kicking, a .38-55 bullet from his own owner's rifle lodged in his brain.

Most surprised of all at his sudden victory, Old Cimarron paused only long enough to gouge once, in passing, into the quivering hide of his fallen adversary, then plunged for the cover of nearby willows. The bullet that Dudge sped after him plowed only a shallow, bloody furrow along his rump as he vanished.

Only the quickness with which Mike McVey dropped behind a boulder saved him from the next one.

"Hey, Dudge!" he called out loud enough to be heard across on the other ledge. "I never shot to hit you. I jest—"

Dudge Whitehall's answer came quickly. It was the whitish puff of a rifle ball smacking limestone.

"Listen, here, Dudge!" McVey called out half placatingly, half angrily. "You got no call to take it thataway!"

This time he got no answer.

"Hellzadingus!" he grunted presently. "I must of made him mad!" he shouted again, and when no answer came, crawled cautiously back up into the timber to his horse. Whether because he kept too well to cover or because Dudge was already gone, or did not choose to shoot at him, he never knew.

Thereafter the two men always managed somehow not to meet.

THAT was the summer Ol' Cimarron was a six-year-old. The year the rings on his great horns clocked him at eight, a great change came to the mountain cow country over which he ranged at will, a change that automatically gave him full status as an outlaw, to be hunted and shot on sight. It was a change that originated in the demand of the American dinner table for better quality beef. For some time it had been spreading across western cattle ranges from Texas to Montana. It was, in brief, replacement of the rangy, long-shanked longhorn type of cattle by breeds better formed to carry generous cuts of sirloin steak—principally white-faced Herefords.

Here in the mountains Walt Satterlee started it, over on the Jaroso. Others followed suit, and presently a meeting was held. Mike McVey and Dudge Whitehall were both there, but they did not speak to each other. The theme of the meeting was "get rid of the scrubs and longhorns."

"We got to raise the kind of beef the market wants," Walt Satterlee argued. "Or go out of business. But a few of us can't raise white faces to do no good as long as there's scrubs and longhorns bullin' around all over the range."

Mike McVey was not much concerned about the better profit whitefaces would make him. But he was a neighborly man and if his neighbors wanted to run Herefords, he would not stand in their way. The agreement to get rid of the longhorns was unanimous. What he had to say gave him a pang but he got it said:

"As I reckon you all know, there's an ol' dun cimarron bull wearin' my brand that like as not can't be drove out. So I reckon he'll have to be shot. If I ain't got the job done in a couple of months, any man here will have my leave to do it for me—except—"

What he had started to say was "except Dudge Whitehall," but checked himself, not from fear of a fight, but from a natural distaste for enmities between neighbors.

"Except—" he finished, a little lamely, "I kinder wish you'd make sure not jest to cripple him. It ain't his fault he's an outlaw."

"That's reasonable," agreed Walt Satterlee. He turned to Whitehall. "Didn't you have an ol' rusty roan about the same age as Ol' Cimarron, Dudge? What ever became of him?"

"Ol' Rusty? Why—why he jest disappeared, Walt. Overmatched hisself with a grizzly, maybe."

There was something like sullen challenge in the look he gave Mike McVey, but Mike kept his mouth shut. "Some day," he thought, "me and Dudge'll come to it over the end of a gun, sure as hell's an inch wide—but not as long as I can help it."

THUS, on that morning with the late spring snow on the ground, when McVey's long distance shooting spooked the longhorn wildly back into the timber away from imminent battle with the white-faced bull down in the meadow, Old Cimarron had been nearly two years a declared outlaw, and though a good many

bullets had seared him, none had cut him down.

"A couple of months," Mike McVey had said. But the first good chance he had had, a week later, to finish off Old Cimarron, he had passed up. "Give the ol' booger a few more weeks of grace," he had thought, "till the new summer cattle begin to come in, anyways." But later opportunities for a sure-death shot had not materialized, for the old bull was now not only wild as a wolf, but also wary enough to avoid showing himself very often in daylight. So now it had been two years, instead of two months, and Old Cimarron, was still very much alive. Now, in fairness to his neighbors, it was up to Mike McVey to rid the range of him.

The trail that Old Cimarron's long, sidling stride left through the moist, snow-splotched timber was both familiar and easy to follow. Easy, that is, to keep sight of, though the route he picked through thicket and windfall was neither easy nor quiet traveling for a man on horseback. Like an old buck deer, the bull knew the crafty art of spotting his course through noisy going that would warn him of a man's approach.

There was a possibility, of course, that the bull would circle to get back to the other cattle and the whiteface with whom he had exchanged challenges. But he didn't. Though unaware of having jumped him, within a mile Mike McVey perceived by the tracks that Old Cimarron knew he was followed and was heading out as if he aimed to hit for the roughs forming the heads of Plenty Forks Canyon close under a rocky crest of Big Mountain. Once he felt sure of this, McVey quit the tracks and circled wide to a trail that would bring him out periodically on ridge tops whence he might catch sight of the wild bull if he kept to the same course.

"The danged ol' booger!" he kept saying to himself. "Smarter'n a wolf!"

In spite of the tough job it made for him, somehow he couldn't help a feeling of pride in the longhorn's wild and wary wisdom.

About the same time Mike McVey struck out on Ol' Cimarron's trail that morning, over west of Big Mountain, Dudge Whitehall set out on another track up the Valle Alamoso. It was the track of a huge grizzly, smeary with the blood of a DW cow he had killed and fed on during the night. Within a mile Dudge jumped him from his bed, glimpsed the great silvery form shuttling swiftly away through the timber and let go three quick shots at it. Thanks to the gyrations of his bear-spooked pony, all three shots missed. But evidently they put the fear of God into the bear, judging from the way his tracks lined out toward a rocky crest of Big Mountain, beyond which lay the craggy roughs heading Plenty Forks Canyon. As fast as his sweating pony could carry him up the long aspen ridges, Dudge followed.

IT WAS within an hour of sundown when Mike McVey topped his tired horse out on the bony back of a high ridge and saw, some four hundred yards across near the crest of the next one, a sight that made his eyes bug out. Instinctively he yanked his carbine from the saddle scabbard and threw in a shell, then realized it was too far to shoot with any certainty that the old short-barreled .30-30 would hit what he aimed at.

As he dismounted, uncertain just what to do, all hell seemed to come unbuckled across yonder on the steep, rocky slope, as old Cimarron's great dun figure suddenly ripped free from the grip of fangs in the top of his bulge-muscled neck, whirled once for position and lunged head on at the reared up, silver-tipped body of a huge grizzly. Sidestepping the charge, the looseness of his upper lip and nose curled back in wrath, his white teeth popping together like pistol shots, the grizzly landed a swift blow on Old Cimarron's massive neck with one of his powerful forepaws. It was a wallop that would have broken the neck

of an ordinary cow or steer. But though it seemed to stagger him a little, Ol' Cimarron kept his feet, whirled swiftly and caught the sidling bear's midriff square with the bony crown between his horns. Squalling, the bear went down, only to roll over as the spear point of one of the Bull's long horns gouged him, and slash upward with a deadly fang rip at Cimarron's throat.

Still the dun bull kept to his feet. Agile as a deer he sprang back, and rolling his tail, charged again. With a thrill McVey saw that this time the bear was down, and it looked, from the swing of his head, as if Ol' Cimarron had a horn in him. Then he saw that the shoe, momentarily at least, was on the other foot. For when the bull's head came up with a great windy snort the grizzly came with it, lifted by fangs caught deep in the gristly flesh of Ol' Cimarron's right jaw.

Too far or not, McVey raised his rifle. To his surprise, when he tried to take aim, his hands shook like those of a boy with buck fever.

"Don't swaller your cud, Mike!" he told himself. "Aim high—an' take it easy! You got to hit that bear an' hit him quick or Ol' Cimarron's a goner!"

At such a moving target it was too far, and he knew it. And no use to shoot wild. As he strove to center the silver-tip in his gun sights, the sudden sound of another rifle shot slapped the air—and another. With a throaty roar the grizzly let go his hold, reared, staggered a few steps down the hill, fell and lay struggling to get up.

Forty yards up the ridge from the bull and bear McVey saw a man step from behind a tree, advance a few steps along the craggy ridge crest, then raise the gun and shoot again. It seemed to McVey that he could even hear the slap of the bullet as it struck. Old Cimarron did not even flinch but the fallen grizzly's struggling ceased.

FOR once Old Cimarron, deafened perhaps by the blood in his ears, paid no heed to the sound of shots. With a snort half triumph, half fighting rage, he lunged downhill to gore the fallen grizzly first with one horn, then the other, and, finally to trample him back and forth, with all four feet. A moment for this final complete destruction of his fallen foe, and the longhorn paused, lifted his great head high and filled the sharp mountain air with a series of hoarse, trumpet-like bellows. Then, rumbling deep in his throat, staggering a little he moved slowly up the hill toward the narrow gash in the rocky ridge crest where the luckless grizzly had so recently disputed passage with him, and disappeared.

When, by a hard-spurred, circuitous route, Mike McVey got over there, Dudge Whitehall was stooped over the grizzly, skinning it.

"I seen how you dealt it, Dudge," said McVey quietly. "An' I'm mighty grateful to you."

"For nothin', Mike," Dudge Whitehall spoke shortly, but he looked up with a grin. "Hell, Ol' Cimarron would of whupped him anyhow, same as he would that roan of mine if I hadn't butted in!"

"The danged ol' booger!" grinned McVey. "Whichaway did he go?"

"Over he ridge." Dudge pointed with his chin, straightened and stuck his knife in the log over which the grizzly had fallen. "Maybe we better go take a look."

Less than a hundred yards over the ridge they found Old Cimarron standing, head down, under a tree, his ears ripped to shreds. In a red pool about his front feet bright blood dripped in a fast trickle from a wide rip in his throat. He did not even so much as roll an eyeball.

"Plumb done for, ain't he?" McVey gulped a little when he said it. He raised his rifle, but Dudge Whitehall's hand touched his shoulder.

"Maybe you rather I'd do it, Mike," he said quietly with the old friendly tone.

Quickly he took aim. Old Cimarron, outlaw master of the mountains, scarred but victorious, never knew what hit him.

LUMBERJACK LIMITED

By CLAY PERRY

Author of
"Timber War on Ghost River," etc.

BILLY LARNED doubled up his fists and made a feint to fight for his place in the long line which undulated along the plank walk of Water Street like a centipede, with its head at the window of the employment office. A half-drunk jobseeker had just jostled him out of line. Billy's gesture was automatic—and it was no more than a feint. He was actually too weak and sore and sick of stomach to follow through, although he was a professional boxer—or had been until a few hours ago. Right now he was looking for a chance to work in the woods, and the water-front "hunky line" which furnished raw recruits for the Temiskaming Logging Company was the best thing that offered.

He feinted—then quit. Men looked at him like wolves who saw a brother wounded and would pounce upon him if he went down.

"The devil with the dirty job!" he mumbled weakly. "You can have my place if you want it. I'm through!"

He slouched away, trying to be truculent, but he took only a few uncertain steps before he sank down, shakily, his feet in the gutter, his head between his hands,

elbows propped on the patched, dirty knees of his old gym trousers.

After a moment he raised his eyes and gazed dully across the street. A crudely lettered motto over the door of a store penetrated his perceptions. It was headquarters of what Water Street called "Sally's Army."

"A Man May Be Down but He Is Never Out." Thus the familiar legend read.

"The hell you say!" Billy muttered as if the sign had spoken to him. "If I'm not down *and* out, nobody ever was."

Two hours ago Billy had stepped from the door of that store after a night of aching misery on a thin mattress on the floor.

Ten hours before that he had emerged from the Trois Rivieres Arena, badly beaten by a slugger from the river-front, in the ring, and afterwards kicked and booed and slugged by the rough element of the audience who called the fight a flop and accused Billy of doing a dive to the canvas. Since the referee and the management of the Arena, as well, agreed with this accusation, it was practically unanimous.

Billy was broke, sick and hopeless. Nobody without a marvelous memory would have recognized this gutter-snipe who did not have the guts to fight for a job, as Billy Larned, two years ago lightweight champion. Nor would they have seen in him the William J. Larned who, ten months ago, had been a leading citizen of

the little old town of Garrison, New York, gentleman, fiancé of the daughter of the man who owned the town, and with the ambition to plant a million pine trees a year and watch them grow to be timber.

First had come the fire that swept him out before he could think of insurance. Then pride cost him his sweetheart. Even then he had ambition, health, strength, and Dutch Burns, his lifelong friend, trainer and sparring partner.

AFTER a year in retirement, he went into training for a come-back. Not being able to make the weight in his old class, undaunted he stepped up a division, fighting under the name of Slugger Simpson. He was not quite sure of himself. He had no heart for fighting. They did not even call him Slugger Simpson, now. They called him "The Diving Simp," and it was not such a good fighting name. This was not the first time he had feinted and quit.

Billy did not blame Dutch for deserting him, Dutch who had stuck to him through thick and thin. This was the edge of nothing, Billy realized that. And Dutch had warned him that no man can stage a come-back unless he has heart in him, unless he loves the game he plays.

There Were Fights of All Kinds Along the Rivers, and Billy Larned Was of All Things a Fighter

Billy felt his heart crumpled, broken, empty.

"You got to quit boxin' in this division, Billy, and rough 'em," Dutch had said.

"And I thought I could box 'em and beat 'em," Billy told himself. "He quit me, right."

IT DID not occur to Billy that Dutch might have gone looking for a job, although Billy's idea of seeking work on the log drive had come from his old friend, who had spent his early years in the west coast logging camps.

There was a train waiting in the railroad yards at the end of the alley beyond the employment office, the locomotive steaming, headed north. At the end of its run there would be a job, a food-laden table in a jack-pine shanty, a bunk filled with hay, warm clothing—hard work filled with danger. At the window a sharp-featured man passed out identification tickets to each man and a stake of two dollars.

But now, after two hours in line, Billy Larned had let an ordinary bum elbow him out and had no heart to fight him. He hid his face in his hands, the damp sweat of weakness on his forehead, his tongue rough and bitter, his lips parched.

A heavy hand closed on his shoulder, the fingers digging into the sore muscles until Billy winced and pulled away. He looked up into the face that glowered down upon him. He caught his breath. It was the last face in the world that he would have expected to see, here, the last one he wanted to see. An ugly face, the mouth drawn into a snarl, a nose flattened into a grotesque lump of flesh.

It was Billy Larned who had mashed that nose, with a blow. This man was Brute Baker, an ancient opponent of Billy Larned, contender for the lightweight crown.

He was the only opponent that Billy had had in his entire career that he had fought with the fury of hatred in his heart, reckless of himself, reckless of rules. He had wanted to knock him out, cold. He had wanted to hurt him, to maim him—and coming out of a clinch he had struck as he knew how to strike with his terrific short-arm punch and had felt the bone crunch, saw Baker's face go pasty white and his eyes glaze over with pain—and knew that he had ended Baker's ring career.

Well, Baker had had it coming to him. He was well-named Brute Baker. He was a bully, a woman-breaker.

"What's eatin' you, bo?" Baker's harsh voice demanded. "You got lots of muscle, ain't you got the guts?"

The hand closed again on his shoulder. Billy winced away again, as much from the question, which struck home, as from the pinch of those hard fingers. He did not recognize it as the hand of Opportunity.

"Well, you want a job or don't you?" rasped the hoarse voice. "Snap out of it and shake a leg if you want a ticket to Temiskaming."

Billy turned his head and saw that the centipede of men had vanished. The agent stood at the window, still. Evidently Baker was the "crimp" who helped to herd the drunks and bums to that window, for a price. Billy pulled his cap low, hoping that Baker had not recognized him, believing he could not have recognized him or he would have used his foot instead of his hand.

"I'll have to get out of this town if Baker is the runner for the camps," he told himself. "He'll kill me. Dutch has quit the burg; there's no good my hanging around."

Aloud he answered Baker's rough demand with, "Sure, I want a job, but I was shoved out of line. I'm a little shaky, yet."

"Yeah? Got a hang-over, eh?"

"I need something to eat."

"Get aboard the Lumberjack Limited, bo, and I'll send a waiter to serve you your breakfast," chuckled Baker. "And make it fast. The train leaves in two minutes."

II

BILLY stumbled up the car steps and through a narrow door into a fog of smoke and reek of sweating men and rapidly emptying bottles. He bumped into a swaying man who rapped him on the head with a bottle, then swiftly offered him a drink from it. Billy did not like liquor, but his stomach was threatening to turn over inside him. He had led an unhealthy life for months, half-starved from dieting and trying to sweat and run himself back into the lightweight class. He took a little swig of the raw spirits and shivered.

"None o' that!" warned his rude host. "Bottoms up and see the sun shine through the moonshine!"

Billy shook his head and rushed for a window, his stomach afire. He fumbled for the catch. There came a crash beside his head and tiny particles of glass flew in his face, but a rush of cool air came in and he stuck his head through the hole.

A train butcher was passing with a tray and Billy called and waved his two-dollar bill. The man was busy passing up paper wrapped bottles to many reaching hands and did not notice Billy. The train gave a jerk.

Billy cut his wrist on the glass and lost his money. Blood from the cut, a wave of weakness seized him, and he slid to the floor, down *and* out.

The Lumberjack Limited, all doors locked, steamed northward with its raw recruits for the log-drive in the upper reaches of the Ottawa. The train had orders not to let off a passenger until Temiskaming Station was reached, two hundred miles above. This was an emergency crew, recruited hastily to help herd down the floating logs from skidways and landings, in rafts and runs, through the sorting booms at Dey Swishey, to supply the lumber mills and pulp mills. There were a few real rivermen among the 150 passengers, but most of them were greenhorns, like Billy. Cards, liquor, horseplay, and plain ugliness helped make trouble. The reason for locked doors was evident.

Billy Larned was roused by a man falling on top of him. He had lain half under his seat, protected from the sharp-shod boots that tramped the aisle, cheek against his slashed wrist. When he raised his head he looked, as one man yelped, "like bloody moider."

It was the drunken man who had hit Billy on the head, then treated him and finally aimed a bottle at him, who had toppled onto Billy. He scrambled up, shouting for water, and began to crawl down the aisle after it on hands and knees. Billy, his face burning like fire, his head pounding, followed him, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth. The creeping man pulled himself up by the faucet of the water-cooler and let the iced water trickle into his mouth. It did not suit him. He got up, leaned against a seat-back and kicked at the faucet. It bent the brass spigot aside so as to shut off the water entirely. He struck the metal tank with clenched fist and skinned his knuckles. Angrily he demanded a chance to whip the train crew and the railroad company, then kicked in the door of the washroom and vanished.

Billy was accused by other thirsty pilgrims of having damaged the tank. One man struck at him. Billy ducked and aimed a feeble counter-blow. It landed just as the train lurched and the man who got it fell over on top of two rivermen who were droning out a song. They rose up and flung the other man off and made for Billy. Billy had to fight or be flattened. He was so sick he could keep his feet only by propping himself in a corner.

Billy did not want to fight. Had there been a door open or even a window broken out large enough for him to dive through, he would sooner have flung himself off the speeding train than fight it out inside. But at his back was a metal tank, at his left a wooden wall, and at his right a high-backed seat. In front of him were angry men

with spikes in their shoes. If Billy did a dive those spikes would make hamburg steak of his face. He had seen that happen to a man in a saloon.

Billy fought. Desperation kept him up but could not galvanize his muscles. He was very sick. He had been hurt badly at the Arena and had not slept a wink afterwards. He had eaten no supper and no breakfast, and fever had finished the job. Despite his skill in boxing, Billy knew that he was outclassed. The man who had bent the spigot came out of the washroom and precipitated the attack. Billy was flung flat and two men fell atop of him—fortunately. Spiked feet clambered over the squirming pile and someone wrenched the spigot clear off. Ice-water squirted out and bathed Billy in its refreshing flow. It routed those who milled about above him and he rolled over and opened his mouth for a drink.

He was jerked to his feet by a heavy hand upon his collar. A harsh hoarse voice growled in his ear.

"Tried to start somethin', eh, you dam' greenhorn! I'll knock the livin' daylights outa yuh. I might as well do it now as wait till up the river."

It was Baker, Brute Baker, whom Billy had thought to escape by getting out of town on this train. He knocked Billy down in the aisle with a swing of his foot and when Billy got halfway up, blind from blood and water, he was floored again with a blow from Baker's fist.

From sheer habit he got up again and surged forward, trying to go into a clinch. Blows rained on his face, on his chin, his ears, his mouth. Saliva started from his glands and new weakness engulfed him. A form brushed by him, pushing him into a seat.

He swabbed his eyes with his sleeve and looked up in amazement at the giant whose back was in front of him. A voice with a bull-like bellow burst out and huge arms descended on Baker's shoulders and lifted him from his feet.

"You want to kill that greenhorn, eh?" the giant bellowed.

There was murderous menace in the man's tone. The confusion in the car was checked by the voice. The man loomed a full head higher than Baker. He must have been six feet six and he was built in proportion, with legs like pillars, arms like the hips of a horse.

Silence, except for the creak and grind of the train. Then Baker's voice wheezed out, choking but bitter and sharp with warning.

"Be careful or you'll kill another man, Louis Lang!"

The giant released Baker suddenly, recoiling as if he had been struck. He turned, his great hands going to his breast, gripping at the coarse cloth that covered it so as to threaten to rip away the buttons. Billy got a glimpse of a square face, clean-shaven, strong, but contorted with a look of terror on it. He sank into the seat behind Billy, gripping the back so hard that it creaked and the cast-iron braces threatened to snap.

"Dieu me sauve," he muttered hoarsely. "God save me! If I only could remember!"

III

"ALL out! Temiskaming station! Tumble out, you hellions!"

The conductor of the Lumberjack Limited, hitherto conspicuous by discreet invisibility, shouted his warning at the door of each car as he unlocked the cages which held the wild beasts from civilization who had come to conquer the wilderness. The train ground to a stop beside a cindered platform. At one end was a wooden water-tank, at the other end a thick swamp into which plunged a narrow, black road. Opposite the water-tank was a long, straggling warehouse with a coop of an office tacked onto one end. Across the tracks the ground sloped steeply down to the river, which rushed out of the forests that stretched

away to the tundra of the Hudson Bay country.

Billy Larned did not join the rush for the doors. He felt too weak. Besides, he waited for Louis Lang, who sat with his head bowed on the seat before him, muttering, groaning, and trembling with emotion. Not until the conductor came into the car and shook him by the shoulder did Lang rouse from his curious mood. He stared wildly about him, like a tiger seeking escape; then his gaze lighted on Billy Larned and with an exclamation he seized Billy by the arm and half-carried him from the car. He made directly for the nearest carry-all. Lang shoved Billy up and then climbed up behind him.

A buckboard hauled by a pair of wild Indian ponies emerged from the forest and drew up beside the platform. The driver leaped out before the team had come to a stop, reins in hand, and began looking up and down the platform anxiously. A chorus of cat-calls, whistles, and taunting remarks rose from the crew.

It was a girl, roughly dressed in short skirt and leggings, a cruiser jacket, a cap. The jacket flew open in the wind and revealed a superb form, a slender, fine neck, and the face was delicate, though brown as an Indian's. Billy Larned, revived by the keen, evergreen-scented air, regarded her curiously. Evidently the girl was looking for someone she expected on the train. Baker, who had headed for a carry-all, halted and swaggered toward her. At first she paid no attention to him, but when he planted himself directly before her and spoke to her she acted. She raised a whip, butt end foremost, and struck hard at Baker's face.

The action brought a howl of delight from the crew. Billy grinned, cynically—for the presence of a woman in this place which was so entirely a man's world seemed to mean only one thing. Baker flung up an arm and fended off the blow, catching her wrist and twisting her arm so that she dropped the whip. He whirled her about and caught her other arm, pulled both arms tightly about her and held her trussed and helpless, thrusting his unlovely face close to hers and speaking in her ear.

Billy Larned became aware of a violent movement in the seat beside him. He turned and got a shock at the expression on Lang's face. It was a pallid, contorted mask of hatred and fury, his eyes fixed on Baker with so murderous a glare that Billy gasped and moved away from him. But the giant did not move; he gripped the seat with his huge hands until it creaked and shook beneath him, his breath coming in hoarse gasps.

THE tension was relieved when a bustling little man came out of the office account book in hand, and called to Baker. It was the superintendent of the company's warehouse. Baker flung the girl roughly away from him. She recoiled like a bent spring, snatching up her whip as if to strike him again, but the ponies snorted and threatened to bolt and she was forced to attend to them.

"She's a spitfire!" Billy exclaimed. "Who is she, anyway?"

"Who?" rumbled Lang, in a groan. "*Dieu me sauve,* it is Jeanne, my daughter. And that beast is trying to taunt me into an attack."

"Why, you could break him in two with your hands!" exclaimed Billy scornfully.

"Indeed. But I dare not put my hands upon him again. If I did, I would surely kill him and that—" He broke off with a groan and a suspicious glance at Billy. "She came over from the Mattawan strictly

against my orders," he said. "I forbade her to come here."

Baker, having made his report to the superintendent, turned back toward the girl. She shouted something and waved her hand to Lang, but the big giant had slumped forward, his face in his hands. Billy saw beads of sweat on the man's face. Remembering the big fellow's defense of him, on the train, Billy was stricken dumb by his action, now. He had missed the end of the encounter between Lang and Baker.

The girl raised her whip again as Baker came near her, but he advanced with a vicious grin. The comments of the crew became filthy. Baker side-stepped as the girl lashed at him and then leaped forward, his arms out to grasp her.

Billy Larned stood up, suddenly galvanized. In a moment he was on the ground, in a furious rush toward Baker. There was not a little feverish hysteria in his action, but there was also an impulse born out of ancient knowledge of the man. Billy had smashed his nose because of a weeping woman, a poor, underworld creature who had come to him with a tale of Baker's brutality. This woman was different. And she was the daughter of this groaning giant who seemed afraid of his own strength and dared not even defend her, but who had rescued Billy. Besides, she had spirit. It was her father she had come to meet, with what must have been an important message, Billy believed. The wagons were already in motion. They halted, one by one, as Billy Larned leaped to the attack.

He struck Baker on the jaw. Behind the blow was fury but feeble strength. Baker took the blow with a backward jerk of his head. A look of angry surprise came on his face, as if he had been bitten by a dog he had fed. If Billy Larned had any lingering doubt that Baker knew him, it was dispelled by that look.

Billy realized his impotence as he set himself for the return blow. He realized, too, why Baker had mustered him into his crew. The punishment Baker had administered to him on the train was only a foretaste of what he might expect up in the swamps along the river.

"I'm in for it, anyway; I might as well have it over with, now," Billy told himself, and struck again.

Matched for a bout in the ring, if Billy had been in condition, he might have beaten the heavier man at boxing; but he was in no shape to fight him, bare-handed, in the narrowing circle of river-rats that formed on the platform. Billy felt his knees weakening as he met Baker's rush, and clinched. Steel caulks bit into the thin toes of his sneakers from Baker's heavy drive-shoes. He winced and tore loose, limping aside.

"It's the Divin' Simp!" piped a Cockney shrilly. "He'll do a dive, pretty quick."

A roar of laughter went up, mingled with growls of angry recognition. His defeat in the Arena had followed him to the woods. He took a blow on the side of his head that made his ear ring and spots dance before his eyes, and he staggered against one of the eager audience. He was shoved violently back into the center of the open space.

"Stay in there and take it! You asked fer it!"

Setting his teeth Billy bored in, his head low, planted it against Baker's midriff and pumped short-arm jabs to the stomach. He heard and felt Baker grunt and recoil and he followed up his advantage, clinging with one hand while he pounded with the other—but his blows tailed off to taps, for his strength was fading fast. Baker threw him off and cut him with a ripping, glancing blow on the cheek. He began to cover, waiting, trying to gather strength for another rush, to find an opening for a straight blow to a vital spot. It was his only hope.

Baker seemed content to stand off and aim side-winding blows at Billy's head. They landed often. Cries of delight roared in Billy's ears. In a few seconds his

face was pummeled so that he could hardly see. Pulses pounded in his head, mingling oddly with the savage, derisive cries of the mob whose hot breath he could feel on his neck, now and then, warning him to stay in and take his medicine.

Billy did land a lucky blow. It was one that took Baker's breath for a moment. But when he recovered, his anger had increased and he crouched and advanced with narrowed eyes and bared teeth, his purpose well expressed in his face.

Billy braced himself to take punishment and take it standing. For the second time in his life he faced a man—and the only opponent he ever had faced—whom he lusted to hurt. There was something in the man that called out a primitive hatred in Larned. Fever and semi-starvation and a terrible beating from many hands and feet had weakened him, but his heart did not quail.

It was apparent that Baker's triumph could be but a matter of seconds, now. Billy's arms were numb and he kept his feet only by planting them flat and wide apart. There was no respite for him, no sixty seconds of precious relaxation between rounds, no referee, no bell to save him as he began to falter.

But he was no longer Slugger Simpson, nor the Diving Simp. He was Billy Larned, fighter. Not Lightning Larned, boxer—he had lost his speed—but, sick as he was, he swallowed punishment which made even the blood-thirstiest of the watchers swear in amazement. Gradually it became understood that this wretched pug was fighting for a woman, and the woman stood there, in the background, her olive face pale but her black eyes blazing. The crowd parted a little to give her a view of the fight, as if that might make it more of a contest. Baker rushed and Billy retreated. He halted at the edge of the platform, not a yard from Jeanne and Louis Lang. She cried out as she got a close look at his face.

"You are killing him!" she cried to Baker.

The river boss halted, looked up at her with a grinning, cruel sneer, and nodded.

Then something struck Billy low and foul. He slumped to the ground as an ox will fall when brained with an axe. Baker was forced to leap away to evade a lightning blow from the whip-butt in Jeanne's hand.

"What a brute you are!" she cried. "Can you not fight fair, even when you know you are the stronger?"

"Fight fair!" he cried harshly. "Not with this damned pup who fouled me in a clinch and got away with it because he had a big name. Ye don't like my face? Well, this is the one who spoiled it for me. I been layin' for him and I got him. Kill him? Not me. I don't go for that. It don't run in my family."

He cast a sidelong, upward glance toward Louis Lang, with these words.

"You're fired, Lang," he said. "Get to hell out of here, you and your woodcat, before the Mounties come, or I'll—"

Lang flung up a hand, his eyes widening in terror. Baker turned on his heel, contemptuously, and left them, and Lang swayed on his feet as if he had been struck over the heart.

IV

THE superintendent at Temiskaming Station, all business, had boarded the train as it backed onto a siding. He came bustling back and called angrily to Baker. He had not seen the fight. It was his business to take care of this outpost of the company, and Baker's to handle the riff-raff. He was aghast at the ruin the lumberjacks had wrought in the ancient railroad coaches.

Baker left Lang and Jeanne, and went to meet the superintendent. Lang knelt down and placed a hand over Billy's heart. He looked up at Jeanne.

"He is alive," he said, "but he is like

a burning fire. Jeanne, why did you come here? I told you—"

"To tell you that you are wanted as river boss on the Mattawan drive," she broke in, a little impatient but not a little proud.

"God is good!" burst out the giant. "I did not believe they would try to move it after last year's failure. God is good but Jeanne, I am in trouble! I joined the Temiskaming crew, believing it the only thing to do. Baker pretended to be my friend but he has proven a cruel, sneaking beast. Jeanne; if the Red Coats come for me you must promise to flee from the country."

"Trouble? The police? *Mon pere,* what is it?"

"Hush. I cannot tell you now. Later."

The carry-alls were in motion, the platform cleared of all save these two and the unconscious, bloody form of Billy Larned. Lang looked this way and that, then down at Billy again.

"If I leave him to Baker," he muttered, "he will finish him."

He stooped and picked up the limp form and laid it gently on a bed of sacks filled with hay in the rear of the buckboard, fodder for the ponies. The two got in and the ponies whirled and darted into the forest, in the opposite direction from where the carry-alls had gone.

BILLY LARNED awoke, fighting. His threshing hands brushed a rough surface and the feeling of ridged bark halted his delirious struggles. He made out, at length, that he lay in a bunk which was built against a wall of undressed logs. He smelled the pungent scent of pine; then he caught a flicker of flame and made out a fireplace, blazing with pitch pine. A fire seemed to be consuming him. He made an incoherent sound in his throat and a miracle happened. Cold water was put to his lips, his head held up by a soft hand. His lips were so swollen that the water dribbled from the corners of his mouth. It was wiped away, softly. He made out Jeanne's face, dusky, pitying but drawn with some terrible anxiety other than for his condition, something that preoccupied her. Then he sank back into unconsciousness.

He was in his corner in the ring, between the rounds of a fight that was tearing the heart out of him. His opponent was a grinning, animal shape, who pounded him with fists like rocks until his body ached, his abdomen was shot with sharp pains, and it hurt him to breathe or to move or even to swallow.

Out of his nightmare he mumbled into speech, and the two persons who stood beside his bunk looked at each other meaningly as they heard him.

"Dutch, you are right," he muttered, "I don't blame you for quitting me. But, Dutch, I stayed with him till he fouled me. Next time I'll lick him. I can lick Brute Baker!"

"Who is this man?" Jeanne asked of her father.

"They say that he was a champion," replied Louis Lang, "a trained boxer who, once, was somebody. He is a fighter."

Could Dutch Burns have seen the fight that Billy Larned had made against Brute Baker he would have agreed. He would have known, too, that the Diving Simp was gone; that this was Billy Larned back again. He would have been puzzled to know what had worked this miracle. The dancing, darting boxer whose failure to come back in a heavier class because his fighting had no heart in it had been transformed, suddenly, into a tiger who attacked without counting the cost to himself, regardless of his racked and burning body.

There were three reasons for this. One was Billy's ancient instinctive hatred of Baker; another was the unwarranted brutality with which Baker had assaulted him. The third reason Billy Larned, himself, did not comprehend, for he had looked on Jeanne Lang with cynical eyes. He had seen women manhandled many a time

without bursting into furious defense of them. Bitterly he had regretted the blow which had broken Baker, not only because the woman who had stirred him had proven unworthy of his chivalrous fury but because, long afterward, he found that blow was remembered against him by the public, and because Billy realized that the prize ring was no place to settle such affairs. It was a business mart. It had been so, always, for Billy.

In the days and nights through which he weaved a feverish nightmare Billy Larned fought over all his lost battles, coming back always to the final one. He was obsessed by his failure but buoyed up by the sane realization that he had "stayed with Baker" until a foul blow put him out. The first thing he asked when he came to himself and found Jeanne standing by him, a look of mystification on her face, and in her deep dark eyes, mingled with the pity she did not try to conceal, was the question:

"He fouled me, didn't he? I was watching for that, because he had a right to do it. I had it coming to me, I suppose. How did he do it?"

"Poor boy, he did not strike you with his fist. It was his knee that he used. That is how they fight in the woods. A fight is no fun in the camps of the Temiskaming country."

Billy lay silent for a long time, as he digested this. Finally he smiled, grimly if a little wanly.

"I see," he said. "He gave me the knee. I must have been pretty far gone, anyway. I didn't know it. I see! Well, I have got to learn to beat Brute Baker at his own game, then."

Jeanne gave a little gasp, shaking her head in amazement.

"But you are far from Baker's camp," she said. "You are up on the Mattawan, more than a hundred miles from where his crew is working."

"How did I get here?"

"We—father and I—brought you here from Temiskaming Station. Father was afraid to leave you there. You have been a very sick man."

Billy raised his hand and looked at it. The flesh was white, and his arm, from which a loose sleeve fell back, looked strange to him.

"Baker will have a hard job making the weight," he muttered whimsically, and then seriously he added, "I've been a lot of trouble to you—and you have trouble enough, I guess."

"It has been little trouble," Jeanne denied in a matter-of-fact tone, "I have cared for many a poor fellow who has been injured on the drive. It is dangerous work. Do you hear that booming sound? That is the jam being broken up in Mechant Rapids."

"Is your father working on the drive?"

"He is boss of the river," replied Jeanne proudly. "When you are well enough he will give you a job. If you wish to stay and work on the river for a time."

"Where is the drive going?" inquired Billy. "To the Ottawa?"

A spasm of something like fear swept Jeanne's face.

"Yes," she said, in a constrained voice, "to the sorting booms at Des Oiseaux." She pronounced it Dey Swishey, with the Canadian accent, which puzzled Billy as he tried to identify the place, and his attention was diverted from her expression.

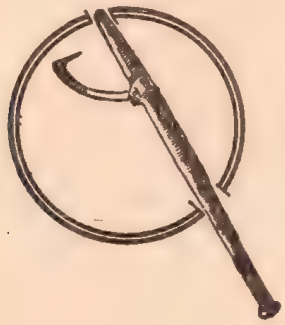
"Then we shall probably meet the Temiskaming drive, eh?"

"God forbid!" she burst out and her dark eyes turned this way and that. "Let us hope that there will be no meeting with Baker again."

"That is just what I do hope for," declared Billy Larned, clenching his fist, "because I haven't finished with him."

"No? And I fear that we have not finished with him, either," Jeanne murmured, half to herself. "It will be a bad time if the drives meet on the Ottawa.

Last year there were many men half killed —and one who died. And that is the trouble between Baker and my father, now."



"By the way," exclaimed Billy, "about that trouble—is there something hanging over your father that he fears?"

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Jeanne, looking anxiously about. "You must say nothing. Father is forgetting—and that is the best thing. Nothing has happened—yet. I have said too much, already. And I have forgotten, entirely, to express my great gratitude to you for your brave defense of me at Temiskaming Station."

"You have expressed it without needing words," said Billy. "It was a poor battle I put up. I'll finish *that,* sometime."

"You must stop talking; you will tire yourself. You have been very ill with a fever. It is a wonder you did not kill yourself."

V

LOUIS LANG seemed, indeed, to have forgotten the threat which hung over him. As boss of the river, Lang made headquarters at first at his own *cabane,* set high on the south bank of the turbulent Mattawan, which rushed down from the west toward the Ottawa, joining it at Des Joachims rapids. The maps of Pere Marquette who first pushed a canoe up through this wilderness had so named the place.

Louis Lang was a descendant of those sturdy pioneers who had established the fur-traders' trail through this wild country. He seemed a part of the woods where he worked, a giant well suited for this gigantic industry in timber which had replaced the fur traffic. As a riverman, Lang was superb. He showed no sign of the trembling cowardice which Billy had seen him display on the Lumberjack Limited and at Temiskaming Station.

Billy Larned, wrapped in blankets, sat on the bank of the river in the sun during the first days of his convalescence and watched the picturesque activity of the river-drivers as they coaxed the stubborn river to their will. There was magic in the wind and in the woods and waters for him. He had a keen interest in trees, stimulated in him when, as champion lightweight, he had occupied a cottage in a forest reserve at Saratoga Lake and had conceived the idea of turning to forestry and reforestation as his life work when he retired from the ring. Here he saw nature at its wildest and witnessed the furious fight which the pioneer wages to wrest from the wilderness its riches. Naturally a man of action, it was not long before his feet began to itch to run out of the log jams and try his own strength with a peavey or pike-pole. At the end of a week of loafing he begged Lang for a job.

"What kind of job do you wish?" Lang inquired.

"Any kind," Billy answered. "I'm not proud. I was once." He winced and grew a little pale, "I got over it. It will help me to gain strength back if I do something."

"That is true. I'll put you in Charley Lavurney's gang," he said, considering, with an eye on Jeanne.

"In the whitewater gang!" exclaimed Jeanne. "But that is only a joke, *mon pere,* that you are making! He should be on the shore gang."

"I think not, Jeanne. He is nimble and swift on his feet. He will see the best of river work and enjoy it. It will be impos-

sible to keep him off the jams anyway. It will be better for him to be with Charley, the best whitewater boss I have ever seen. Charley needs men, just now. It will take us a month to reach the Ottawa, at this rate—and the freshets will fail us, I fear."

Lang's argument prevailed. For a week Billy clambered cautiously along the shoreward fringes of the numerous jams which piled up in the swift, shallow water of rapids and learned to handle a peavey and a pike-pole to keep his footing in calked shoes. At last—as Lang had predicted—he yielded to the lure of the logs in whitewater.

He stood on the edge of a tight-packed mass of spruce and tamarack watching Charley Lavurney hunt and probe for the keylog with his peavey. Charley coached him as he worked, showed him where and how to throw his weight upon a log and help to loosen it. It was a small jam and Charley asked no other aid to master it. Unexpectedly the solidly jammed raft of wood began to crumble. Charley jumped for a floating log, stabbed another with his peavey to steady himself—and gave a yelp of surprise when he found Billy riding that log, as he was the other.

It was a dangerous situation for them both. Alone, Lavurney would have taken it as a matter of course, but he found himself with a greenhorn riding beside him in the swirling, leaping rapids, and that greenhorn a protégé of the boss—and he expected catastrophe. The log beneath Lavurney's feet began to roll and turn. Charley shouted to Billy to stab it with his peavey point.

Charley was unable to prevent the two logs drifting apart. But Billy shook his head and laughed aloud as he thrust his peavey point deep in the water-soaked bark of another log, on the opposite side from Lavurney's. Charley swore and twisted out his own peavey, letting Billy ride alone. For himself, Charley trusted to the single log, dancing on it as it rolled, using the peavey to balance himself, threshing it into the water now and then, as he was threatened with a spill.

Billy rode alone, with a second log as a crude out-rigger, anchored by his hold upon it with the peavey. Every second Lavurney expected to see him slip and go under, dashed down by the frothing billows of the rapids. To his surprise Billy stayed up, keeping balance carefully, treading the slow-rolling log that he rode while he held to the other and steered himself between the rocks.

It was over in two minutes, both men riding in quieter water where the river deepened. They were floated against a loose-packed raft of timber near the shore. Billy leaped off and zig-zagged across the bobbing logs to dry land. He stood waiting for Lavurney, a smile on his face and the flash of triumph in his eyes.

Charley Lavurney, veteran of twenty years of river work, bow-legged, squat, premier log-driver and log-rider, trotted up to where Billy stood and stabbed his peavey in the ground. He thrust out a gnarled hand and gave an oath of admiration.

"How you do dat?" he demanded. "You been foolin' me, baggar! W'ere you learn to top timbaire in w'ite wataire?"

"Right here on the Mattawan, Charley," answered Billy, grinning broadly. "From the best log-rider in the world."

"W'at? You mean Jeanne, she's been teachin' you to birl de log?" demanded Charley, with wide eyes.

"Why, no. I mean you," answered Billy. "Quit your kidding!"

"I don't keed you. Eef you tak' lesson from de bes' log-rider in de work', den dat's Jeanne Lang, baggar, I tell you! She can birl 'em till dey sing lak a turtle in de pond. You mean to say you nevaire birl de log before? You got queeck feets, for a greenhorn."

"I've never rode a log in my life, Charley," Billy assured him. "I didn't know whether I could do it today. I took a chance, and it's a great game. Look here,

don't you try to get me to bite on one of those greenhorn jokes. I've done my bit at going after the water-auger to open a hole in the river and I've tried to find a left-handed peavey for a southpaw who had lost the only one left in the *wanigan* and I've gone looking for a sky-hook and strap-oil and a few other things, but I'm not going to try to find a burl in a log for you. It's only bird's-eye maple that has burls in it, and that won't float. You are trying to fix up a game on me, with Jeanne."

Charley burst into loud, long laughter and clung to his peavey handle for support. "You mean to say you don' know w'at it mean to birl 'em? Dat's lickin' a log wit' your feets. An' baggar, you got fas' feets. I bet you, give you tam, you can beat Baker."

"Beat Baker!" gasped Billy. "You mean—"

"*Oui,* Billy, dat's Baker's game. Every spring, down at Dey Swishey, at de sorting boom, dey have de 'roleo: Dey birl 'em an' butt 'em all over de rivaire. Bully Baker, he beat me las' spring. He wet me two tam, in de birling; he poke me wit' de butt stick in de stomach and almos' drown me. Lake to get it back at heem, but I'm slowin' up on my feets. It's de rivaire rheumaticks. I don' know who will be de man to stan' up dere wit' Baker dis tam."

Something flashed out of Billy's memory that told him this was no greenhorn joke that Charley told. A picture of two men standing on the same log, facing each other, rolling the log under foot so fast that water spurted up at each end and made a shimmering sheet on the surface of the log.

"Birl 'em, eh?" he exclaimed. "So that's Baker's game, is it? Um hum! And he used to be a boxer!"

"He don't only used to. He can box 'em now. He's de wors' fighter on de rivaire. Nobody can lick 'im. Nobody can wet 'im, now I'm all cripple' up wit' de rheumatiz—and dey ain't nobody in dis woods dat can lick him, excep' Louis Lang. An' de man dat can birl' 'em an' butt 'em an' lick 'em at desorting boom, he take his drive t'rough firs' and let de oder lay in slack wataire onless we get lot of rain."

Billy stood staring at Lavurney—and beyond him—as the riverman disclosed the situation. And as it penetrated his perceptions Billy Larned felt a creeping fire run through him, surging in his veins, quickening his pulses, and a resolution was born within him in that moment. He caused Charley's jaw to drop and remain hanging when he spoke.

"There's another man can lick Brute Baker," he said quietly. "I'm the man can do it. Boxing. Fighting. I'm in training, now, for just that very thing. Can you teach me to birl 'em—and butt 'em? I don't know anything about it. I'm guessing at it. But I know this much; that birling means fast footwork, and balance and out-guessing the other man. Butting, is about the same as canoe-tilting, isn't it?"

"Baggar, it's worse an' den some!" cried Lavurney. "Dey put two men on top a cork log, two men on anodder. Each of two dey got a pike-pole wit' de end of it wrapped up in burlap. Dey get opposite each oder an' de referee, he say 'Butt 'em!' an' dey poke each oder lak hell till one fellaire he's gone off into de wataire. Dat's buttin' 'em. It's rough. De birlin' ain't rough, but it's de fastes' work on two feet. Lak dis!"

Charley turned and jumped a log that lay detached from the rest and began to turn it over with his feet. To Billy's eyes he seemed quite fast enough, but soon Charley yelped and slipped and went to the waist in the water. Painfully he climbed ashore, Billy helping him.

"It's dat dam creek in my laig," he complained. "Too much col' wataire every spring. Rheumaticks. It tak de young fellaire, lak you. Baggar, you want to learn it?"

"Right away," replied Billy, his eyes glowing.

"Get to it, den. I show you how an' roll you an' den w'en you wet me, you hask Jeanne an' she show you how to birl 'em faster dan hell. Dat's a good game."

"Baker's game," muttered Billy. "If he learned it, I can learn it, too."

VI

THE champion finds his class. Billy Larned, recovering his strength and quickness by his daily work on the drive, was getting the best training that a man could have for ring work—and for *roleo* work, as well. He despaired of being able to trot the tricky timber when he first saw how an expert did it. The expert was Jeanne.

Down at the foot of the bank, below the cabin, in the elbow of a bend in the river was a quiet pool which had been boomed off. On the bank, lay three pine logs with the bark removed and smoothed down with a draw-shave. Jeanne initiated Billy into the mysteries of the birling billets. The logs were bone dry and rode water like cork, having been seasoned for a year. Here the rivermen gathered on a Sunday morning and rolled the logs into the pool for practice at the birling game. Some of the them were fairly good at it, and could stay on a log for several minutes, rolling or birling it beneath flying feet; but inevitably, before many turns, they slipped off and went into the cold water, yelling and spluttering. For balance, when they first stepped onto the logs, they held tamarack poles, one end in the water, but at the command, "Throw your poles," they abandoned them and, two men on a log, facing each other, tried to roll each other off. Charley Lavurney, the veteran, stiff with rheumatism, was still the master of any of the men, but he groaned and shook his gray head at his awkwardness which, to Billy, seemed lightning agility.

When Jeanne stepped on the smallest of the three logs and began to tread it, Billy's eyes opened wide. She was a slim figure of delicious grace, in jersey and trunks, her feet in light, low shoes, with short sharp spikes. Her dark hair was tucked up under a rubber cap and as he watched her and heard the admiring Lavurney ramble along about how she had birled since she was a little thing and had been the sensation of the *roleos* at Dey Swishey for years, Billy began to understand how it was that Brute Baker had conceived a violent desire for her.

Alone on the log she was its absolute mistress, rolling it this way and that with her swift feet, running from one end to the other, turning, dancing, holding it still and kneeling upon it, skipping rope and sitting in a chair that was tossed to her and, finally, playing leap-frog over Charley Lavurney's bowed head.

She challenged Charley to a match, and the veteran, grinning with pleasure and in anticipation of a ducking, faced her on her chosen log, a perfect cylinder fourteen feet long and as many inches in diameter.

Billy saw the birling game as it is played in a tourney. Ten minutes of the fastest foot-work he had ever witnessed, the log swirling so rapidly that it seemed a roll of moving water as sharp spikes bit into its surface and sped it around. It moved in the water from its speed. The trotting feet began to race, to sprint, faster and faster and suddenly, with a cry, Lavurney slipped backward and went into the water. Shouts of applause and laughter came from the crew.

"Dat's birlin' 'em, baggar!" panted Charley as he swam to the boom and crawled out on its flat surface.

"I don't believe I'll ever be able to do it," said Billy.

"But sure!" declared Charley. "You ron de log on de rapids more sooner dan any greenhorn I ever see. You can birl 'em. Jeanne, she show you de tricks. De bes' birler in de worl', he's a boy w'at nevaire see a saw-log till he start trainin' in an indoor pool, one wintaire. De nex' summer he is champion. It's in de feet and laig—

an' you got to have balance-an' stren'th, an' you got to be fas' lak hell."

"It ought to be good training for a fight," observed Billy, soberly. "As good as any amount of road-work and rope-skipping. I'll try it for the training, anyway."

LIGHTNING LARNED was coming back. Long experience in the ring had made Billy faster on his feet than any other boxer in any division. He had the natural balance which makes the acrobat, the aviator—and the birler. Within a week, under the tutelage of Jeanne, Billy Larned began to be able to stay up there, alone, for an indefinite time without falling. Then Jeanne birled against him until he learned some of the tricks of competition. She pitted him, for a real match, against Charley Lavurney, and after two wettings, Billy managed to roll Charley in. He was already faster than the veteran.

"I'm in training for a *fight,*" Billy protested at their praise. "I only wish that my old sparring partner, Dutch Burns, was here."

"Well, I tell you," Charley predicted grimly, "if dere's any fight at Dey Swishey beside dis birlin' an' buttin', it will be on de log boom and de bes' man on hees feets, he will win. I hear tell," Charley went on anxiously, "dat Brute Baker, he's got a slugger in hees camp dat's showin' him all de new fandangles in de fightin' game. It's a fellaire he picked up down at Three Rivers, an' he ship him up rivaire ahead of dis las' gang."

"Who is he? What does he look like?" inquired Billy, pricking up his ears.

But Charley had not seen the man. He had been told that the fellow was an ex-pugilist who had worked on the river before.

"No, it couldn't be Dutch," Billy denied his own swift conjecture, born out of hope that it might be. "Dutch would never join up with Brute Baker's crew."

But this bit of gossip that Lavurney had passed on set Billy even more grimly at work at his training. In the "butting" game he found a fair substitute for the sparring that he could not practice, because there was not a man in Lang's outfit that knew how to handle his fists. They were clumsy, slow fighters, compared to the sort of muscle lightning which was Billy's stock in trade. By instinct they preferred to use their feet and teeth—or a peavey or a club,

rather than fists. But in the log-tilting they gave Billy plenty of sturdy practice. Lavurney toppled him time and time again, before Billy caught the knack of this rougher sport of the log-riders.

He improved rapidly, both in birling and butting, not only because he was a bundle of splendidly coordinating muscles and nerves but because he had fighting brains and because he was so deadly in earnest. His one single purpose, to meet Brute Baker and beat him, amounted almost to an obsession. And still he did not comprehend just why he had grown to hate the man so bitterly.

IN THE crew of the Mattawan, Jeanne Lang was treated almost as if she were a boy instead of a girl. It was the way that Louis Lang had brought her up from babyhood, this motherless only daughter of his, and he had trained his men to act toward her as if she were sexless. No one would have dared, if he had wanted to, to offer her the slightest evidence of anything but comradely respect. Louis Lang, in his own domain, along the Mattawan,

was an absolute monarch and not merely by virture of his authority as river boss. It was by virtue of his gigantic strength and the ability to use it. A half-breed who gave Louis Lang a surly and unexpected answer to an order was picked up and flung over Lang's head into the river.

Billy learned that the *roleo* contest at Dey Swishey had grown out of the natural rivalry of the river crews and, likewise, by the encouragement of wise heads in rival lumbering companies who saw in it a substitute for the annual shambles which occurred when the crews met. This rivalry was now steered into the channel of a birling tournament, in the natural sport of the rivermen. Birling and butting took the place of peavey battles. The winner had the right to put his drive through the sorting booms ahead of the loser.

The tourney did not always prevent a good old-fashioned hand-to-hand and tooth-to-ear conflict. Indeed, the last spring, there had been a battle, two or three days after the *roleo,* in which a man had been killed—or at any rate his body was found floating among the logs days afterward and there was some talk that he had been choked to death. There were purplish marks on his throat. There was talk of the Mounted Police being sent for, to investigate, but the coroner from the nearest river town, Pembroke, had held an inquest and given a verdict of drowning. Charley Lavurney passed this on with the other river gossip to Billy, as they worked and trained together.

"Is that what's the matter with Louis Lang?" inquired Billy.

"*Eh, bien,* mebbe so he got de spring fever," Charley answered. "De hooch raise hell wit' de ol' man, when he tak' too much. You ought to see heem! But you wan' to see heem firs', because he's crazee strong. He lick up de hull gang of Baker's las' spring. Baker got almos' knock out himself."

"But why did Lang join Baker's crew?" Billy asked.

Charley shrugged. "It didn't look lak dere would be any Mattawan drive, dis spring. You see, dat fight come because Baker hol' up hees drive so long at de sortin' boom, dat de headwataire go down. De Mattawan drive is stranged in de rapids. Dat's w'y we got so moch sweepin' to do off de bank dis spring. De ol' man, he lose all hees money. He join up to get some more. He mak' it all up dis spring if we have some luck, though."

"Um hum! You mean that a lot depends on winning the *roleo* at Dey Swishey?" Billy inquired.

Charley did not make a direct answer. He cocked an eye up at the blazing blue sky, which held not a cloud. Again Charley shrugged, "You can't tell. De ol' man he can fight, though."

"But will he?" muttered Billy.

"*Baggar,* eef de companee don't know he'll fight dey don't geev heem dis job to tak' down de Mattawan drive," declared Charley.

Billy wondered. He doubted.

The Mattawan drive was pushed into the last rapids above Dey Swishey. A half-breed courier, despatched by Lavurney to see how the headwater was holding in the big rapids, reported Baker's drive was already in holding booms along the east side of the main river, opposite where the rapids broke over the rocks and swept in to swell the mighty stream which flowed south to the St. Lawrence.

VII

LOUIS LANG shifted his headquarters from cabin to *wanigan,* a huge houseboat which drifted down behind the drive. It was a combination of cook-shanty, office, and bunk-shanty for Lang, Jeanne, the cook and his helpers, and Billy Larned, whom Lang insisted upon treating as his guest. The drivers tented along the shore.

Louis Lang relapsed into gloomy moodiness and Billy blamed the smell of smoke for it. But when he spoke to Charley La-

vurney about the big boss' curious change Lavurney said:

"Baggar, it's anodder kin' of smoke he smell. It's de kin' dey make out of woods alcohol an' mix it wit' wataire."

Billy, already, had been introduced to that sort of "smoke," otherwise known as "lumberjack lightning." It was a dangerous mixture of smoky hue that drove men into frenzied drunkenness. But he could not believe that Lang's appetite for alcohol was entirely responsible for his moodiness.

His growing suspicion was clarified in a flash, as he lay in his bunk in the tiny cell partitioned off from the main room of the *wanigan.* Tired out after a strenuous day that had finished with an hour or two of birling and butting practice, he had fallen asleep as Jeanne and Lang talked. He was roused from a doze by a sharp cry and heard Jeanne speaking.

"But *mon pere,* cannot you remember anything that happened?" cried Jeanne.

"Only that there was a terrific fight on the logs," Lang answered. "And then, two days later, they found Buck Dwyer in the river. Purple marks on his throat. The men looked at me with fear in their eyes—and with a threat. Nothing was said, because they did fear me. I had been drinking, Jeanne. The coroner from Pembroke, he, too, was fuddled by liquor. The matter passed—but this spring Baker offered me a job in Three Rivers as if I were so much *canaille* and when I refused him, he asked me if I was afraid of ghosts at Dey Swishey. I did not understand and I became angry. He continued to taunt me, and I throttled him. He said, 'Be careful; you will leave marks on my throat!' It paralyzed me, when it came to me what he meant. I enlisted in his crew because I feared not to. He threatened me. *He hints that I killed Dwyer at Dey Swishey."*

Lang finished with a groan, mumbling, "If I could only remember!"

"But, *mon pere,"* Jeanne cried, desperately, "Baker was there, in the same fight and he—"

"He pretends that he lied to the coroner, to save me."

"He lies again! He would be guilty of concealing a crime if he did that."

"But it is no better for me—because it is *my* crime!"

"I do not believe it! Could not other men bear witness?"

"It was in darkness, Jeanne. No other man saw what happened but there is one man who might know the truth," he added. "He was with Baker in Three Rivers, when we met again for the first time after the fight. I believe he knows. He had it in his eyes. They were honest eyes, but he was the ugliest man I have ever seen. His face had been disfigured by an accident or by a blow. He had thick ears that seemed to have been frozen and swelled. He started to speak but Baker checked him with a warning which I did not catch. I searched for him, afterwards, in Three Rivers, but he had vanished. Then I joined the Temiskaming drive crew, hoping I might learn the truth, perhaps run across the man in the camps, up there. I would know him, at once, if I ran across him again. He had eyes like a baby in a face like a gargoyle."

Billy Larned found himself sitting bolt upright in his bunk, every nerve taut, his ears and eyes wide open, straining, his breath held.

"Was he a riverman?" Jeanne inquired, hopefully.

"I do not know. It is like trying to see in a fog, I know so little. I would know him, that is all I am sure of."

"And so would I," breathed Billy Larned, "in a fog or a fire or the darkness of midnight. *Dutch Burns!"*

He was about to slip out of his bunk but was checked by Jeanne's sibilant "Hush!"

The room, outside, became still. A door opened, softly. There was the sound of something moving in the water as if a man poled a bateau against the current. When Billy opened the door of his bunk-closet

the outer room was empty. A pencil of light came from the latch-hole of Jeanne's door.

IN THE morning Jeanne told Billy, calmly—too calmly, he thought—that her father had been called up-river to the company depot at Mattawan, and that he would not be back for the *roleo.* Charley Lavurney was left in charge of the drive.

"And he forbids me to go to Dey Swishey," she added bitterly. "I must stay here, in the *wanigan,* while you birl Baker, to win for the Mattawan crew."

"Jeanne," he said, "I heard something of the talk between you and your father last night. I know this man whom he thinks may know—the truth."

"*Mon dieu,* then you know—what is weighing on *mon pere,* so terribly? He would be—"

"It will remain my secret—as much as it can be secret, for already it is gossip in the crew. This is no ordinary cowardice that your father has, Jeanne. It is a father's anxiety for his daughter. It is the fear of his own great strength, and what he may do with it—to Baker. Baker needs a beating. That man with the ugly face and swollen ears and blue eyes is one whom I once claimed as my best friend. He was my trainer and sparring partner, Dutch Burns."

"But what is he doing with Baker?" cried Jeanne, wide-eyed.

"I do not know. He hates Baker and despises him. If he is in the Temiskaming crew it is not by choice."

He told Jeanne something of his attempt at a come-back in the fistic game. Of Burns' devotion, his final advice, and then his mysterious disappearance.

"I believe that Baker had a hand in that," he said. "Dutch Burns would never turn against me. He must have gone into the woods, to get work, ignorant of what happened to me in that last fight at the Arena. At Dey Swishey I will find out."

"At Dey Swishey," breathed Jeanne, regarding Billy from eloquent eyes, "you, alone, will meet Brute Baker in the birling. There is no one else can stand against him. You must beat him!"

"I must beat him," Billy echoed. "Today you must show me every trick over again. If I can beat you, today, I can be sure of Baker."

Jeanne flushed, her eyes snapping.

"You can beat me," she declared. "For a long time I have known that you could do it. You have held back your full strength and speed. Birling is a man's game. No woman can beat a man who is good at it, as you are. Oh, I can do some fancy tricks which you have not learned, but you are quicker and stronger than I am, in a contest. Now, I shall try my hardest to beat you. Come! Get your shoes!"

They took the lightest log and birled, from the start, at top speed, nip and tuck. Twenty minutes passed and each stood up there, girl against athlete, Charley Lavurney holding the watch on them.

Jeanne used every trick she knew, spending her splendid fleetness desperately. Twenty minutes of swirling, swishing action, no sound save the rip, rip of calks in the wood, the ripple of water, the sob of their breathing — then suddenly Jeanne with a cry flung her hands high and went in the river.

"You have done it, Billy!"

Billy lurched and tilted and threatened to follow her into the water.

"One fall—that is—nothing," he gasped.

Jeanne, swimming slowly toward the boom, only nodded. Her hands began beating the water feebly. Billy plunged in and swam to her, helped her to the boom, where she clung weakly.

"You see," she panted, "I gave everything I had and you beat me. You can do it again."

Billy put his arm about her and held her up and she gave him a smile that had the dignity of pride and the sweetness of

surrender in it. Charley Lavurney, checking time, muttering to himself, missed a revelation.

"You can beat Baker," she whispered, "I am sure of it. But perhaps you may have to fight him, also."

Billy's muscles tensed. He held her closer, until her shoulder pressed against his cheek.

"That is what I am training for," he declared. "Not only to birl him but to beat him, because he dared to place his hands on you."

VIII

THE Mattawan drive came rumbling down the upper rapids of Dey Swishey. The drivers kept the logs moving, working madly, eagerly, recklessly. The thunder of swift water mingled with the boom and thud of timber on the water-worn rocks which formed the bed of the river.

Below, the rapids opened out a deep-flowing stream half a mile wide. Across the dark, deep water lay two log booms which met in the middle, at an angle, a sort of funnel with three spouts formed by booms laid parallel to the flow of the stream. Through these spouts would pour thousands of logs from Mattawan and Temiskaming, herded like cattle into different booms, according to their markings. Spruce and hemlock, pulp-wood for Ottawa's huge paper mills; pine and tamarack for the sawmills of Pembroke; fir and pine for Three Rivers.

At the entrance to the three water lanes rose a structure of planks. It was on long poles thrust in the river-bed. There stood the sorters who guided the logs into the proper channels, with pike-poles. Down river lay tugs, waiting with steam up, booms in tow, ready for their quotas of timber, the first supply for the mills.

The rivalry between the Temiskaming and Mattawan crews arose from the advantage to be gained in furnishing the first rafts for these tugs. Bonuses were paid the crew that won through first. But the savage tactics which developed in this contest swept away the profits of victory, as booms were cut or blasted, steamers crippled, rafts of logs scattered and lost and men injured. Now and then a man turned up missing—or his body was found miles down river. It was no wonder the company officials approved of the *roleo* as a better means of settling the question of which was the better crew.

Until Brute Baker became river-boss for the Temiskaming outfit, the *roleo* had settled things for several years. But Baker could neither absorb victory gracefully nor swallow defeat. He had become an expert birler, the chosen champion of his crew. He held his job, in fact, because he was a good log-cuffer. Charley Lavurney alone had stood up with him and beaten him, but Charley was over fifty, growing stiff with age. Baker toppled the veteran in their third meeting. Not satisfied with this and the privilege of shooting his logs through the funnel first, he hampered the Mattawan operations until the old-time bad blood boiled and running fights on the booms and log-fields burst out, with Louis Lang leading his men in the fracas.

And then, at the *roleo* where Baker's foot-work triumphed a second time, Jeanne was on the program, with an exhibition of trick and fancy birling. Louis Lang, inordinately proud of his river-maid daughter with her flashing feet and slim, sun-gilded body, did not dream of the danger she was in. His crew was made up of *habitants* of the Mattawan region, where he and Jeanne had lived all their lives. They had seen Jeanne grow from a curly-haired elf who danced on floating floors almost as soon as she could walk, to a creature of blooming beauty and grace. They were proud of her, jealous of her.

On the other hand, the Temiskaming crew, each year, was recruited from the riff-raff of the cities. Baker, with his crooked, mashed nose and crooked soul, was a fit leader for such a mob. And he,

under pretense of admiration for Jeanne's skill on a log, decoyed her to his practice pool on the Temiskaming side and kept her there until darkness began to fall. Louis Lang, missing her, rushed to her rescue in the gas-boat, and met her midway as she swam from the predatory brute.

Lang, in rage, invaded Baker's boom-works and tossed Baker into the river three times until he went limp and unconscious, and had to be hauled out by his own men. Baker burned with desire for revenge—and with other desires which would satisfy his own passions.

He took revenge first as the Mattawan drive followed his own through the funnel. That battle on the log-fields, in the blackness of night, was one long remembered by the rivermen. Unfortunately, it gave Baker a Damoclean sword to hang above Lang's head.

And now in the present instance Louis Lang was missing when his crew drove into the basin to meet the Temiskaming outfit in the *roleo.* A greenhorn who had been picked up half-dead from a beating administered by Baker was the chosen champion of this leaderless crew. Charley Lavurney would birl and butt, and this white hope from the city had been trained by Jeanne herself. But was he "there"? This was talked about and it was whispered that he had a yellow streak. Bets were offered that Billy would never show up. This suspicion was stirred by the fact that up to the time of the contest Billy had not been seen since morning and that Charley Lavurney, alone, had handled the head of the drive. Also, there were three bateaux missing from their usual anchorage. One of them Lang had taken up-river. Where were the others? Jeanne, the cook said, was sulking in her room. The cook was sulky, too, because he had to stay behind with the girl to see that she obeyed her father's instructions to remain aboard.

The Mattawan men looked for nothing but another defeat.

IX

THE birling pool was formed by fencing off one of the sorting lanes in mid-stream with lengths of boom-sticks at each end. Above it rose the plank platform with its railing of tamarack poles, a bristle of stack pike-poles in one corner, the platform reserved for the referee, timers and announcer, who was the bustling superintendent of the Temiskaming Station.

The booms, for yards in every direction, were loaded with men. A light bateau was dragged over into the pool and manned. It was to place the logs and take the birlers out to them—and to rescue those who went "wet." The judges chosen were one man from each of the rival crews, a third from Dey Swishey.

At the foot of the pool, along the closed end, lay a battered bateau with a single occupant, seemingly shy of the crowd, for he sat hunched up in the boat, a ragged mackinaw jacket muffling his face with turned-up collar, a faded felt hat turned down. A river-rat, evidently, not a river-driver.

Just outside the corner, down-river, lay another bateau, with another nondescript peering out with bright black eyes from beneath a hat so large that it had been necessary to thrust a huge blanket pin through the crown to make it fit. A beardless but smudge-faced countenance was to be seen, now and then, but this river-rat also kept hunched down casting swift, startled glances about when anyone ap-

proached. In the bottom of the boat under a blanket lay a rifle, its shape outlined, which was probably why none of the fun-loving rivermen did no more than spew rough jokes at the fellow who owned it.

Those black eyes snapped when the badinage became rough. They widened and then narrowed as Baker, erect in the bow of a gas-boat came out from the Temiskaming camp, as insolent as a river-lord, his birling pole in hand, and leaped onto the boom even before the boat had touched it.

The preliminaries were run off quickly. Charley Lavurney, wet and downcast, was among the defeated. Baker accosted him.

"Too much smoke and not enough fire, old-timer, eh? Your old hulk draws too much water. Where is this new white hope of yours? I hear he's hiding in the tall timber. Who's goin' to do your buttin' for you?"

"De same wan you name w'ite hope. I be his secon' man on de log."

"Humph, then I'll have two whacks at him. And I've a second man that can stick on a log like a fly on the cook's nose."

"Ontil he fall in de soup," drawled Charley. "Is dat fellaire de wan I hear been learnin' you to fight wit' de fis'?"

Baker scowled.

"He couldn't learn me nothin'," he declared. "All he was good for was a punchin' bag. Here he comes, now. Ain't he a beaut?"

Charley stared at the figure that came weaving along the boom. His features were flattened until his face was like a dish with a knob in the middle. A wide mouth, caved in from missing teeth, and a pair of ears like fungus growth on a tree combined to form a physiognomy as ugly as the face of an in-bred bulldog. Only the eyes expressed intelligence. They were big and blue and mild. They belied the frightful mask of ugliness. They smiled while the rest of his face glowered.

He came to the bateau and sat down with a grunt, rubbing his chest and right shoulder gingerly. Baker chuckled.

"Sore as a boiled owl where I been tappin' him every day, for an hour or so. Keepin' in trim. Well, where's the great unknown?"

Charley shrugged and said nothing.

The bustling announcer ran up and down the boom, bawling for everyone to clear away from the side booms and make room for the birlers. He sought the Mattawan champion in vain. The timers leaned on the rail, watches in hand. The matches, so far, had given a draw, honors even for each crew.

Then the hunched-up man in the bateau inside the sorting lane flung off his mackinaw and hat. He rose, pole in hand and leaped lightly to the log, which had drifted down to his end. It was the fourteen-inch log, which none of the birlers had managed to roll, every one of them, even Lavurney being dumped on either the sixteen or the fifteen-inch logs.

The announcer rushed toward the intruder with a warning to keep out of the pool, but he halted as he saw the easy grace with which the fellow trod timber.

"Hey, who the hell are you?" he shouted.

"Birling for the Mattawan crew," came the crisp reply. "Name of Billy Larned."

"Bill—my God!" croaked the astonished announcer as he came nearer. "It's that 'bo that Baker basted at Temiskaming Station. I thought he crawled into the train and went back to Trois Rivieres. I'll be —Hey!"

"Call up the birlers," demanded the referee impatiently.

"Brute Baker and Billy Larned on deck! Get ready for the final match."

The flat-faced gargoyle on the bateau jerked suddenly to his feet. His mouth opened, his eyes bulged. He took three uncertain steps and seemed about to fling himself into the pool and swim toward the dancing birler at the lower end. But he swung his head about, looking this way

and that, and crouched down on his haunches, muttering to himself.

"Get the birlers in that bateau!" commanded the referee. "Drag the toothpick log back to the boom. Come on, there!"

Billy Larned sprinted and the log beneath his feet traveled in the water, and before the bateau could be got out he had brought the log to the side boom himself.

The Mattawan crew, suddenly aware of their champion, burst into a roar of cheering. Down at the corner the huddled hulk of a man knelt, unnoticed, lifting a grimy face to the sky with his hands clasped as if in prayer.

Billy leaped into the bateau, snatching up a pole from the boom, and was rowed toward the big log, on which Baker already stood.

Baker had his eyes on his feet and did not look up until Billy got aboard and the referee ordered:

"Steady your log!"

Baker's little cold eyes flickered, his face twitched as he looked into Billy's face, and he swore an oath that seemed torn from him.

"You!"

Billy nodded.

"Throw your poles!" came the command from the referee.

Baker dropped his pole as if it had slipped from nerveless fingers as Billy skittered his across the water. A ripple started as the timber was spun beneath spiked feet. Their calks beat a rapid tattoo which became faster and faster—and Baker slid off for the first fall after only ten seconds of rolling.

Billy Larned had sprung a surprise on him, sprinting from the instant his pole left his hand, catching Baker off guard. It made a ridiculous figure of Brute Baker.

X

BY THE Roleo rules the birlers had to roll first on the heaviest log. If both stayed on for five minutes they shifted to Number Two, spun it for ten minutes, then changed to the lightest and fastest to race to a finish with no time limit. The match was two falls out of three on the final log.

Again Baker and Billy faced each other on the big pine, Baker dripping wet and grim of face as gleeful jeers came from the Mattawan crew.

"Birlers ready! Steady your log. Throw your poles."

Baker attempted to duplicate Billy's trick, but Billy was ready for him. He trotted easily on the defensive but watching his chance. When Baker slowed for a moment Billy took the log and forced Baker into a desperate sprint. Back and forth the battle raged, until the referee called time. They had birled the full five minutes.

They were taken into the bateau and rowed to the booms to change logs. Baker glowered at Billy.

"You jumped the gun that first time," he declared. "I wasn't quite rid of my pole. Try it again and I'll smash you down."

"You better be ready," advised Billy. "I'm ready for you. You jumped me when I was down and out."

"You got what was comin' to you. Tried to sneak one over on me at Skaming station. That's the second time a skirt has flapped in your eyes and made you go nuts."

Billy got Baker's crude thrust all right; he could not trust himself to reply.

"You ain't very choosy," Baker went on. "Takin' seconds from me seems to be your game. For that matter, Lang and his spitfire daughter don't seem partickler who they pick up and take in. Where's Lang today? Sneaked away? Afraid of the Red Coats. A fine family! Say, I been coverin' Louis Lang up, thinkin' he'd appreciate it. But now—"

"Now you intend to squeal on him, eh?" Billy burst out. "You won't dare! There's one man who knows too much about that

fight at Dey Swishey. *What have you done with Dutch Burns?"*

"Hah! Give him a job when he was down and out. Like I did you. But he appreciates it."

"You—you mean Dutch Burns is—in your crew?" gasped Billy.

"You bet he is. And in my corner, too," Baker exulted. "He's my second man on the buttin' log today. And he's been with me all spring, showin' me *your* stuff."

Billy laughed.

"I bet he has! It would be like trying to teach a blind man with pictures. You never were anything but a slugger, Baker. You never could be a boxer. And why don't you learn something about birling?"

"By God, I'll learn you!" Baker snorted. "I only wish the skirt that learned you her fancy tricks was here to see it. I'd enjoy wettin' you and maulin' you a little better. And when I'm through with you I'm going up to Lang's—and there'll be a showdown. Either they'll be reasonable—or else. Nobody can get away with murder in this neck of the woods."

"No. And I'll see that you don't get away with it," Billy shot back at him. "There will be a show-down, all right, when I find Dutch Burns and get what he can give me."

"What the hell could Dutch know about the killin' when he never saw Dey Swishey till this spring?" demanded Baker, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Truth leaks out of the neck of the bottle," said Billy cryptically.

"On the log!" ordered the referee sharply.

The second round of the Roleo battle was on. It was going to be a fierce one. Billy knew that, but he also knew that it was not the main bout between him and Baker, which must sometime be fought. This was only a preliminary, after all.

Baker was a veteran at the birling game, compared to Billy. Billy had hoped to anger Baker so that he would be a bit reckless in his fury. But Billy was, himself, so agitated now that he let the log get away from him before he quite got the feel of it. A desperate effort to meet the sudden swirl that Baker gave it, failed to save him. Baker spun it like a top and Billy went off, "climbing the air." Baker himself went wet, but struck the water a split second later, so it was his fall.

The Temiskaming crew whooped for joy—not so much for Baker as for the promise of a quick victory which would hasten their release with a stake for "going over the hump" to the gay and garish river-town honkatonks.

Charley Lavurney whispered to Billy as he shoved the toothpick log to the bateau, ready for use if the birlers stayed on the second timber through their time.

"Let heem ron heemse'f out. Den take de log and ron heem off."

"I'll try it. But even if I lose we are going to fight for this river, Charley," responded Billy. "Baker is trying to do me in and then get to the Langs. If I go under it'll be up to you to defend the Mattawan, alone."

"You goin' to win, sure t'ing," Charley cheered. "Birl 'im to de bottom, Billy!"

The rivals mounted. Baker rushed into a quick spin but Billy was ready; he trotted easily, heel and toe, wary, waiting. Baker reversed the spin and spurted. Back and forth across the pool the whirling log spun, neither man showing a sign of unbalanced work. Billy refused to take the offensive. He saw that Baker was more the master of the timber than he, but believed that on the toothpick Baker's weight would tell against him. Billy birled for time.

It went the full ten minutes and they rested but a moment, then climbed on the sliver, a fourteen-inch cork pine as fast as a fly-wheel. It was so light that Baker found himself compelled to keep close to the middle band, for the timber sank if he stepped near the end. Billy found it easy to poise mid-way for his half and he had the "feel of the wood." This log was almost the duplicate of one of the practice

timbers he and Jeanne had rolled. He sensed the uncertainty of Baker's stance and began to feel confident of himself and his feet.

Ten minutes passed, with both birlers up, Baker now putting up a stubborn defense against Billy's spurts and spins. Charley Lavurney squatted on his heels, bared his yellow teeth, grinning as he watched the birlers. Suddenly he turned and looked into the squashed features of the Temiskaming man who had come to the sorting-boom with Baker in a gas-boat.

"W'at de devil you want 'roun' here?" Charley asked suspiciously.

"A job with the Mattawan crew," was the quick answer. "I want to hump out of the Temiskaming hog-pen. You the boss of the Mattawan outfit?"

"Me, I am a side-push. The big push is up to Mattawan. Me, I don't hire no Skaming scamps. You raise hell wit' the Mattawan drive las' spring. You don' play the game."

"I wasn't here last spring," the flat-dish face persisted. "Only come up this spring. Wish I hadn't. Baker is a bully, all right. I'd like to see him beat. Billy Larned, he can do it, too."

"Humph! W'at de hell you know about it?" demanded Charley, bristling.

"I know a hatful, old-timer," was the reply. He moved away, but suddenly came back and said, "When you get a chance, you tell Bill Larned that *Dutch Burns is in his corner like always.*"

"Hey, wait a minoot!" called Charley as the other retreated again.

But a pair of Skaming men were coming and the gargoyle vanished beyond them.

XI

FOR more than a quarter of an hour Billy let Baker have his way with the log, but met every burst of speed, every drag and snub without trouble. Studying Baker's style, Billy believed he had discovered his weakness. Baker birled mostly with the log rolling so that his right foot was in advance of his left. In the reverse position he was a bit uncertain, and Billy was as good in either position. He had trained himself for this sort of footwork as a boxer and Jeanne Lang had completed the training on floating wood. Billy watched for his chance—and it came as Baker, tiring of a constant roll in one direction, shifted his turn.

Billy danced backward, toe and heel, and then whipped the log into a fast spin, threw all his strength into a long, crescendo birl until the water boiled about Baker's ankles. The maneuver forced Baker closer to the foul line. Billy kept out toward his end, fully six feet from Baker, who was so near the middle of the log he came close to crossing the line.

"Watch that mark!" warned the referee.

"Watch your step, Billy!" called Lavurney.

Baker's eyes flickered for a moment from Billy's feet—and Billy jabbed his spikes in and then suddenly spun the timber the other way.

Baker went down as if he had been struck across the knees with a club. He fell on his hips across the log and rolled in, face to the sky.

The birling match was over, just like that.

The Mattawan men roared their triumph and Charley Lavurney forgot his "rheumaticks" as he danced up and down on a log, waving his pole above his head. At the foot of the boom, in the ancient bateau, the tatterdemalion stood up, hands raised to the sky and cried piercingly. "Billee Larned! Billee Larned!" as if those were the only words known.

Baker crawled into the birlers' bateau and lay down, complaining profanely of a hurt back. He ordered the boat moved to the end of the pool.

"Got to stretch out on the boom and rest," he said.

As the bateau bumped the boom-stick

opposite where the tattered celebrant was still shouting Billy's name, Baker swore and made a threatening movement. A rifle was snatched up from the bateau bottom and leveled at his head, a slender finger crooked on the trigger.

"Put down that gun!" snapped Baker.

"*Attendez!* Halt! Come no closer or I pull the trigger on you!" was the sharp response.

"You dam' wood-cat—whatever you are, what's eatin' you?" Baker demanded suspiciously.

"Go back in and take another beating," cried the other. "You pretend to be hurt. An old trick; you're afraid."

Baker snorted wrathfully:

"Who the hell are you? One of Lang's sweepers? It's Lang is the coward. Why isn't he here? He's afraid, afraid he'll dangle at a rope's end—and I can send him to the scaffold if I want to talk."

BAKER was playing for time, trying to pierce the identity of this savage figure.

The rifle seemed to waver and something like a gasp or a sob shook the slender figure that held it.

"Brute that you are, Louis Lang could break you in two," came the sharp cry. "You have put a spell over him—but you can't use it against Billy Larned."

"Say, I've seen you before!" exclaimed Baker. "I'll be damned if I don't think you're a squaw from Dey Swishey, in man's clothes."

"I deny that you ever knew me. The people of Dey Swishey would disown me if they thought so. They know how Buck Dwyer came to his death."

"Yeah! Louis Lang killed him!' snapped Baker. "What do you know about—"

"Hey, Boss!" croaked a hoarse voice nearby. "The referee wants you to git ready for de buttin'."

Baker stared at a flat-featured, fungus-eared individual as if he were seeing a ghost, and so did the one with the rifle.

"Who—what is your name?" came the whisper.

"Git to hell outa here or I'll boot you into the river," Baker roared. "I got to have a rest. My back hurts."

Something in the man's look, and especially the glances exchanged between him and the other in the bateau seemed to sting Baker to suspicion.

He started toward the flat-face, threateningly. The bateau was swung quickly about close to the boom and its occupant called:

"Jump! Jump in, quickly!"

Baker made a lunge for his man, and the gargoyle jumped, landed on his knees in the boat, as it was shoved away from the boom. The oars swept it farther out and Baker came near toppling in the water.

"Now that was a clost one!" mumbled the flat-face to his rescuer. "He'd a booted me in, sure, if you hadn't got me aboard. Thanks, kid. Where do we go from here?"

The oarsman leaned forward, eyes afire, lips trembling.

"Do you know Louis Lang of the Mattawan?"

"Sure, sure I know that man mountain, kid. Can you tell me where to find him? I want to see that guy."

"You—you want to see Louis Lang? Why?"

"To git me a new job. I'm all fed up with Baker's bread and beans and I think Lang will remember the bum that braced him up when he almost got knocked out at Trois Rivieres, with the 'wood smoke' that Baker handed him. Then

I got shanghaied into his dirty outfit."

"And who are you?" came the tense query.

"They call me Dutch Burns."

"Oh! You—you are—you were a friend of Billy Larned?"

"I'd go to hell for him."

His pale blue eyes blazed and his thick lips set.

"And I would go to hell for him, also," came the tremulous response from the other. "I will take you to Louis Lang."

XII

"WHERE'S your second man, Baker?" demanded the referee. "It's time you was up for the buttin'."

"Hell, he's run out on me," Baker fumed. "The only man can stay up with me on a buttin' log, too."

They walked together toward the platform where the other officials waited.

"Who is it?" asked the referee.

"Dutch Burns."

The referee spoke to the announcer and the little man bawled out the name. Billy Larned, when he heard it, whirled and demanded:

"Who is that you are calling?"

"Baker's second man. He's missin', he says."

Billy had a flash of alarm. He turned on Baker.

"What have you done with Dutch Burns?" he cried. "There's some trick been played."

Baker answered with a sneer. "Aw, he's yellow. He took to the tall timber wid a skirt in pants from Dey Swishey. I can't butt without him."

"That's a lie!" declared Billy. "It's you who are yellow and you've managed to spirit him away."

Baker, without a word of warning swung at Bill, savagely, with clenched fist. Billy ducked the blow and closed with him, and there on the narrow boom, less than three feet across, two flat-hewn logs cleated together, they struggled for a moment in a clinch, then broke away.

There was no room for more than two men to battle here, and by common consent, the Mattawan and Temiskaming crews stood back to let their champions fight it out. Pike-poles in hand, they ranged themselves like opposing, ancient enemies with lances, ready for a charge, or to repel one. Charley Lavurney stationed himself at a strategic corner of the rectangle of booms and another Mattawan man held another corner.

Baker broke from the clinch and stepped back, muttering:

"It's a frame-up to win the *roleo,*" he said. "You stole my second man away from me, somehow. I might of known better than to trust Dutch Burns. Any more than you. You're both yellow dogs that bite the hand that feeds you."

Billy, on his toes, his calks digging into the boom, rushed and swung to Baker's face, an attack that shook Baker, drove him back more. He stepped awkwardly into the slit between the boom-sticks, toppled and stumbled and went headlong into the river.

He came up, gasping, clawing at the boom, shrinking as Billy came toward him, as if expecting steel spikes in his face. But Billy reached a hand to him.

"Come up and fight, Baker!" he challenged. "One way or another; butting or boxing."

"I can't do nothin' without my second man," spluttered Baker as he scrambled up, dripping. "You got the advantage of me."

"Yes, because you are a quitter," declared Billy. "Then we are taking our drive through first."

He turned his back on Baker and started for the sorting platform. He felt the boom surge behind him, and turned in time to meet a treacherous rush as Baker yelled to his men:

"Come on, men, it's a free-for-all, now. We're goin' to shove through ahead."

Billy crouched on one knee and Baker, unable to halt his charge, went over Billy's head and they both rolled on the boom in a clinch. The Temiskaming crew, seeing the sharp pike in Lavurney's hand, kept to their end of the boom as the battlers got up and faced each other. They were now close to the platform. Baker crammed Billy against it and struck wildly at Billy's face, bellowing for help from his crew. They might not have responded but for an unwise move that Lavurney made, when he thrust his pike-point into the platform timbers to keep Billy from being shoved off the boom by Baker's greater weight. The thrust looked like an attack on Baker to some, and tools were snatched up and a rush began. It threatened to overwhelm the Mattawan crew, most of whom had stacked their peaveys and pikes in a corner of the platform.

But that murderous rush was halted suddenly. A shot rang out from the Mattawan side of the stream and a bullet whistled over the heads of the lumberjacks. It came from a bateau that plowed through the logs, in the bow a red-tuniced figure, an automatic in one hand. "It's a Mountie!" cried half a dozen at once. "It's Louis Lang, polin' the boat. Look out!"

As the bateau swung in beside the boom Lang's face was seen, grimly pale and seemingly tense with some desperate emotion. The red-coated officer alighted from the bateau, cast a keen glance about, seeking the center of the trouble that his shot had quieted. Lang started to get out but the officer put a hand on his shoulder and bade him remain in the bateau.

"What's the trouble, here?" the policeman demanded in a rich brogue. "Is it some new kind of *roleo?* And do ye butt without pads on the pikes, now? Peaveys, eh? Drop them timber-stabbers. Charley Lavurney, put away that tamarack knittin' needle!"

Charley complied, exclaiming, "It's no game, we play, baggar, Corporal Sweeney. It's goin' to be two-man fight, onlee Brute Baker, he don't obey de rule'. He jomp on Billy Larned from behin' hees back."

"So I see," snapped Corporal Sweeney, with a glance of disgust at Baker. "Now, what is it, wine, woman or timber?"

"Larned called me a liar, then he hit me and we mixed it," declared Baker quickly.

"And so ye hollored fer help to lick him, eh? I heard ye and I saw the rush. You and your 'Skaming scamps are always makin' trouble, somehow. Well, there'll be no *accidental drownin's* at Dey Swishey Rapids this spring, if I can help it. Park all yer weepons now, ivry wan of ye. On the corner there. Charley Lavurne, you guard 'em."

He turned again to Baker and then to Billy and addressed the latter, sharply.

"Ye're Billy Larned, one-time boxfighter, now a riverman with the Mattawan outfit?"

"Yes, sir, that's right."

"Answer me another, straight, now. Do ye know anything of the whereabouts of Jeanne Lang."

Billy stared, then replied, "Why, the last I knew she was safe up the Mattawan, where Louis Lang bade her stay. What—what has happened, Corporal?"

"Jeanne Lang is missin'," responded Sweeney. "She's been gone since mornin'. An old grub-boat that was tied to the *wanigan* is gone. The cook's half-dead from some pizen likker. Looks like dirthy work. And who did it? Hum!"

Billy stood as if stricken dumb, then his eyes sought Baker's face and the name of Dutch Burns flashed across his mind. Dutch was missing, too!

"Well, well, any answer?" snapped Corporal Sweeney, glaring at Baker suddenly.

"I don't know nothin' about it," Baker growled, then a flash of cunning fired his little eyes. "Except that a bum by the name of Dutch Burns kicked out of my outfit in a funny way—with a skirt in pants."

Charley Lavurney gave an exclamation.

"Baggar, da's de same name dat fellaire

give me w'en he want a job—Dutchman Burns. I forget to tell you, Billy, dat he say to let you know it dat Dutchman Burns, he is in your cornaire, like alwas."

"How long ago was this man here, Lavurney?" asked Sweeney.

"Mebbe half hour or so."

"Um! That seems to clear him of kidnapin'—but about this 'skirt in pants,' Baker?"

"By God!" exclaimed Baker suddenly. "It just come to me—that kid in the old bateau that Burns jumped into—*I bet that was Jeanne Lang!*"

His excitement was genuine.

"How close did you see—the kid?" demanded Sweeney.

"Why, as clost as I am to you. I was talkin' to—to her. She was dressed in an old slouch hat, rough clothes, looked like a squaw or a breed woman. I knew I'd seen her before. Never thought it would be Jeanne.

Then Dutch Burns jumped into that bateau and they beat it down river. That's straight."

"Lavurney, you saw this Dutch Burns; what did he look like?" asked Sweeney, veering away from Baker's lead.

Charley gave a picturesque description and Billy Larned exclaimed:

"That was the Dutch Burns I knew—for years. I didn't know he was up here, though I thought he might be in the 'Skaming outfit somewhere. Why, if Jeanne is with him, she is as safe as with her own father. I'd trust him with my life."

"And wid your wife—or swateheart?" inquired Sweeney dryly.

"Yes, sir," declared Billy, flushing. "With my sweetheart, because if that was Jeanne Lang in the bateau she had found the man she was seeking, and that man was Dutch Burns. He knows more about Buck Dwyer's death, last spring, than any other person—save Baker himself. Baker's charges against Louis Lang are blackmail," he finished abruptly.

"I never laid no charges," shouted Brute Baker.

Corporal Sweeney scratched his head.

"Shure now, the plot thickens and curdles and smells of a rat," he said.

"And the rat is Brute Baker," cried Billy fiercely.

XIII

"WHAT do you know about the death of Buck Dwyer?" Corporal Sweeney demanded of Billy Larned.

Larned hesitated a moment.

"Only hearsay—but it smells," he replied at last. "Veiled threats from Baker, Lang's denial that he knew what happened that dark night. There is a man who knows something more. Dutch Burns, he is called. I believe Baker has spirited him away."

Baker began indignant denial but Sweeney silenced him with uplifted hand.

"This is holdin' up traffic on the river," he said. "Who's to go through the sortin' booms first?"

"The *roleo* was to settle that question but it isn't finished," Billy replied. "Baker refuses to go on with the butting contest."

"It ought to be settled with feet or fists," commented Sweeney. "There's an idea! Larned, you was once a boxer; Baker used to sling leather, too. That sortin' platform would make a dandy ring. Ye both look as if ye wanted to fight. Git up there and settle it and then we'll thry to untangle the rest of the mess."

Billy regarded the corporal with a feeling that there was something behind his suggestion.

Perhaps he wanted to create a diversion, to stave off a riot.

"I'm more than willing," Billy said. "I'd meet Baker in any sort of a ring—or outside one, even if I have to give him twenty pounds weight."

"Where's the gloves? I'll referee this match, and don't think I can't. I've done it often for the boys at the Pembroke barracks."

"No gloves here, it'll have to be bare-fisted," said Billy.

"Suits me, by God!" growled Baker with a look at his hard fists.

Sweeney chuckled, grabbed Billy by a shoulder, Baker by another and swung them toward the platform, urged them up, climbed up behind them and drew them to the center.

"Will you boys promise to fight clean, not to hit in the clinches and break when ordered to do so?" he demanded in the patter of the prize ring.

To Billy Larned the words were like a battle-cry for a main bout.

"I will," he promised ringingly.

"Um!" grunted Baker, narrow-eyed, grudging.

Sweeney warned him, "The first man that tries a foul will git beaned with the butt of this gun. Clear the platform! Throw down them tools, we don't want these boys to spear each other. Take off them corked boots, too! Three minute rounds, and a fight to the finish. Lavurney, Sampson, hold the watches on 'em. Close that gap wid a rope. Come here, Louis Lang."

His orders snapped out like shots. Louis Lang got from his bateau and came up to the platform.

"Afther we settle this little matter of drive rights," said Sweeney, "we'll hunt that runaway darter of yourn. She won't be fur away, I'm thinkin', but hidin' out on us. Then we'll thry to clear up the matter of Buck Dwyer's death."

Lang nodded, seeming in a sort of trance of silence.

His eyes were clouded, following, however, every move the policeman made, as if he looked to him to command his every action.

"Take that corner over there, Lang. Get a billet of wood for your man to squat on, between rounds."

Lang was to act as Billy Larned's second. A bull-necked Temiskaming man was helping Baker strip off his wet shirt and shoes. In a minute the rude ring was ready.

Billy sat on a block of wood in his corner, bare to the waist, his torso pink and gleaming with health—looking at his calloused hands. It seemed strange to be facing the man who, years ago, had met him as challenger of his title as champion of the lightweight division. They were in another class now, and bare-fisted. Not the first time Billy had battled this way. He had started on his way up to the top in boyhood fisticuffs on the Frisco waterfront; after the long fighting stretch, "pushing leather," he was back to the elemental.

This was to be the fight of his life—and this was what he had hoped for. He knew he would sometime have to make it, knew it when Baker had clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder down at Trois Rivieres. Knew that Baker had got him into his crew to try to break him. Billy thrilled with the thought that Baker could not have dreamed of seeing that sick down-and-outer survive and become a better man than he was on twirling timber—and Billy doubted that Baker felt anything but his superior, here in the tamarack-railed ring, high above the river.

Corporal Sweeney removed his gun-belt, hung it on a post, the automatic in its holster. He placed his hat atop it, buttoned up his red tunic.

"It'll not show the blood so much," he grinned grimly. "Are you boys ready? Timers ready? Rap on the floor wid a peavey handle when three minutes is up. Come on, shake hands!"

BAKER, grudgingly, gave Billy his hard-knuckled hand and Billy knew those bony fists would hurt when they landed.

"Time!" called Lavurney.

"Go in and fight!" rasped Sweeney. "Fight! I haven't seen a good one since Gawd knows when. Fight!"

Baker rushed and tried to drive Billy

back against the rough rail, but Billy sidestepped and snapped a sharp blow to Brute Baker's chin. His knuckles stung from the contact with hard bone and Baker grinned, slammed two swift uppercuts at Billy's face. Billy bobbed his head away, then took a slashing blow on one cheek. He tasted blood in his mouth. He knew that Baker was trying to *break his jaw.*

Billy halted another savage rush with a straight jab to Baker's left eye and when Baker winced and put his hand to the optic Billy slammed a right against it and jammed Baker's own thumb against the injured eye. When Baker clinched Billy twisted loose and played a tattoo on Baker's midriff until he grunted and doubled. The round ended with Billy spitting blood, but it was only from a superficial cut inside his cheek. Baker was blinking and asking for cold water on his eye.

A voice came up to Billy as he sat and rested.

"Watch your chin and jab him all the time in the eye."

Billy looked down and got a thrill. The ugly mug of Dutch Burns was turned up to him from an old bateau that floated beside the platform, and in the stern, hat off, gleaming black hair flying in the wind, was Jeanne Lang, her uplifted face glowing with encouragement.

He heard Louis Lang give a grasping exclamation, then the signal sounded and he rose to meet Baker, his whole body vibrant with new strength and determination. He met Baker's half-blind attack with snapping blows to the face. Baker clinched and tried to rub Billy's bare back against the knotty tamarack rail. Sweeney tore them apart.

"Kape clear o' the wood, now!" he warned.

Billy danced around Brute Baker, who shuffled like a clumsy bear, already panting a little. Billy tapped and jabbed at the bad eye. Once he struck Baker's guarding fist so hard his own knuckles went numb. He had to nurse his right hand for some moments and take punishment on the body, but he did not flinch. He was in splendid condition, and so elated at seeing Dutch Burns and Jeanne that Baker's blows seemed like spurts of ice-water, stinging and stimulating.

The second round ended with Baker freshening, getting his second wind. As Billy took his corner Lang whispered to him:

"Below is the man I have sought so long. And with him is Jeanne. I must see that man at once."

"Slip down when I go in for the next round. And tell Dutch Burns to let me know what tricks he taught Baker, in camp. They might come in handy. Tell Jeanne—"

"Thud, thud," went peavey handles on the planks.

Billy went after Baker like a whirlwind. He put into action the words he had started to send to Jeanne—that he intended to finish this quickly. He stood toe to toe with the heavier man and exchanged a shower of blows with him, gradually edging in and under Baker's guard to get at his stomach. He forced Baker to clinch, felt him heaving, slavering at the mouth. Feinting to break away, Baker ripped an uppper-cut toward Billy's jaw. It slid past as Billy bobbed his head aside and Billy ripped a left to Baker's bad eye that brought a groan of pain, as he clinched harder. Sweeney had to pry him away.

In a rage Baker crouched and swung hard rights and lefts, slugging desperately, and Billy took a chance blow on the back of his right hand which numbed it again.

It felt as if bones were broken. He rubbed it hard as he went to his corner and could feel nothing at all in it.

XIV

LANG was back in his corner when Billy returned. He had a message.

"Dutch Burns, he say to save your mitts, now. Bore him in de *solar plex'*, he say. He say he don' give Baker any of your stuff in sparring. And he say he has tol' Jeanne everything about Buck Dwyer. I have no time to ask more. He was excite', anyway."

"And Jeanne?" whispered Billy.

"Ah, she say, to tell you she ron away from the *wanigan* so as to see you beat Baker, feet and fists."

Going in for the fourth round Billy took a glancing blow on the cheek, to get Baker's guard open, swung a swift left to the stomach and Baker wavered, started to clinch, but Billy dodged him and shot two more hard ones to Baker's reddening midriff. Baker slumped, his head hanging low. Billy caught him on the temple and Baker went down, amid roars of cheering from the Mattawans.

"One—two—three—four—" Sweeney counted.

Baker struggled up to one knee.

"—five—six—seven—eight—"

Billy stood back, ready to floor Baker again—with his left.

His right hand was useless.

At the count of ten Baker shot up, backing away from Billy's rush and swing.

The round ended and Billy stared angrily for an instant at the useless fist. The knuckle-bones were driven up into the back of his hand. That last blow to Baker's head had done it. He hid the hurt from Lang.

Billy went into the fifth round, unable to close his right fist.

It was no use rushing the fight now. He had to make a dance of it, feinting with his right, jabbing and swinging with his left at Baker's swollen left eye. The 'Skaming men sensed a change in the tide of battle and cheered Baker wildly. Baker kept doggedly at his tactics, rushing to drive Billy against the rail, crouching, keeping his left eye guarded.

For three rounds more the battle went on, Baker seeming to grow stronger as Billy kept his distance. Sweeney began to complain of their stalling.

Between the eighth and ninth rounds Billy sat, his right hand hanging down behind him, to keep it from Lang's sight, for he feared Lang might want to halt the battle if he saw it. He heard a little, sharp gasp below him. He knew it was Jeanne but did not turn his head; then strong hands clutched his hurt one and a jerk of powerful fingers sent a shot of agony up his arm—but when he pulled his hand up, he saw that the dislocated knuckles had been snapped back in place. Dutch Burns was again in his corner.

"Give him de heel of it, Billy!" yelped Burns. "Give him de heel."

He could now get his fist almost closed, and although it pained badly, he had the use of it to jolt Baker with now and then, and he used the heel of his hand to such advantage that Baker muttered protest to the corporal.

"Aw, fight, fight!" snapped Sweeney. "Afraid to git slapped down?"

Sweeney had seen what had happened. There was little that escaped his keen eyes.

Something escaped Baker's eye—his one good one.

It was as if, suddenly, he had no opponent. He had swung viciously with right and left at Billy's head, missed one, connected with one; then there was no one before him.

Perhaps he thought he had knocked Billy down, or out of the ring. At any rate, he lowered his guard, looked right, then left—and then a fist struck him beside his closed eye, and he slipped to the wood like a log.

Corporal Sweeney counted ten with maddening deliberation, it seemed to Billy Larned as he stood back and watched. He might have gone on to twice that count. Baker lay still until Sweeney went for his gun and hat and someone doused the 'Skaming bully-boss with a pail of cold water. He sat up and looked dazedly into the ugly mug of Dutch Burns who crouched over him, his gargoyle countenance crinkled into a glorious grin. Baker reached, instinctively, for the handle of a peavey that lay where a timer had left it. Billy leaped from his corner as the peavey was swung at Burns'—but Louis Lang was quicker. The big man, in a stride that brought his knee against Brute Baker's swinging arm, broke the blow, caught Baker by the neck and hips, lifted him aloft, and heaved him over the railing like a sack of straw.

Baker turned over and over in air, and fell with a loud smack, flat on his face in the water, eight feet below.

He floated, inert, face down. Charley Lavurney reached out with his pike-hook and pulled him to the boom. He rolled him out and stood looking down at him, his lips curling.

"So! Baggar you fall in, eh? I guess so you was poosh a leetle. Our beeg boss he's on de job again! *Allons, mes amis, ouvrez le boom'.* Come on, my friends, open the boom. We put de head t'rough!"

Corporal Sweeney grasped Lang by the arm as Jeanne clambered quickly up onto the platform to get her father. She was wide-eyed, alarmed. Seeing the corporal with a hand on Lang she gasped: "You have taken him? Why have you taken him?"

Lang was drooping again.

Corporal Sweeney gave a sharp, canny glance about, then his eyes fixed on Jeanne.

"I've arrested your father only because he asked for it, at Mattawan," he said.

"Mon pere, why did you do this?" Jeanne cried, bitterly.

Lang choked. "Only because I could stand the suspense no longer," he replied. "It was killing me. I wish the law to end it, one way or another. I do not know what—"

"But, mon pere, I have found the man who does know!"

She darted to where Burns was attending to Billy Larned's injured hand.

"Come!" she implored, tugging at his sleeve. "Come and tell the officer what you heard Baker say about Dwyer's death. Tell him just what you have told me."

"What's your story, Burns?" demanded Sweeney.

"Why, Baker, he claims he was puttin' up a joke on Louis Lang," Burns responded.

"A joke is it? A murderin' sort of joke, bedad. He told ye that?"

"No, I just heard him say it. It was at Trois Rivieres, in a barroom. Lang was dere, and Baker. I was putty dizzy, but not so bad I couldn't hear—and understand. Baker was blowin' off about how he had bluffed Louis Lang into thinkin' he'd murdered a man. It seems that Buck Dwyer was a good friend of Lang's, and it set him off, bad. The way I figgered, it was Baker hisself did the job. He was purty drunk, and he bragged about how he knocked Dwyer off a log-jam into the river."

"Baker, come here. Say, where is that—"

Corporal Sweeney grabbed for his gun and strode to the rail. Below, at the boom, Baker was getting into a gas-boat and a man was trying to start the motor in a hurry.

"Come back up here, Baker!" commanded Sweeney, leveling his automatic. "Come on, I want to tell ye a joke. It's a joke on the coroner at Pembroke."

XV

BAKER'S face was grotesquely white under his black beard as he slowly, climbed up the ladder to the platform.

"Ye'll like this one," remarked Corporal Sweeney, "because ye're such a grisly

joker, yerself. The coroner has had an attack of conscience. He repudiates the verdict he gave of accidental drownin' in the case of Buck Dwyer. That put the case into the hands of the Mounted. I'm on detail to clear it up, for good. Louis Lang he comes to me at Mattawan and asks me to arresht him. A good joke, what?"

Baker's one open eye wavered, then glittered. "You've got the right man if that's what you want to know," he said.

"Oh, but ye're a joker, to the last inch, Baker!" cried Sweeney. "And here's a man that heard one of your favorites. He says you was only jokin' when you put the Dwyer death onto Louis Lang. He says all you wanted to do was to throw a scare into Lang. Now, look here, it's no joke to me to go and arresht the wrong man for a murder. I want the right man."

Baker went a shade paler, his hands clawed at his throat in a gesture that Billy Larned remembered was much like that which Lang had made when Baker accused him.

"I—Dutch Burns—is a liar if he says—It was a case of a runnin' fight, in the dark, and many a man fell in the river that night. But Buck Dwyer, he didn't show up. They found him—with fingermarks on his throat and—well, I accused Lang of it and he just wilted and it looked as if he did it. I didn't want to be too hard on him so I—"

"Finger marks, was it?" cut in Sweeney. "Hum! The coroner says not. He says they were the marks of corks from somebody's boot. Shure it was a runnin' fight on the logs, in the dark. And ye see there, before ye, a man who never left shore that night because he had no corks in his boots. Louis Lang was not in that battle in the night."

He paused to let that sink in.

And here's another who heard ye braggin', out of the neck of a bottle, how ye had played a joke on Louis Lang—and how ye knocked Buck Dwyer off the logs into the drink. Jokin' aside, Baker, I want the right man—*and I've got him.*" He took a quick step and put a hand on Baker's arm. *"Baker, I arresht ye for the murder of Buck Dwyer."*

Baker would have fallen backwards save that Sweeney held him up. A blow had fallen on him that he could not stand up under.

THE first steam tug that puffed off down the Ottawa bore the Mounted officer and his prisoner. It hauled a huge raft of timber—Mattawan logs, first through the sorting booms.

On the Mattawan shore smoke rose from the *wanigan* galley-stove. A sickly, remorseful cook poked about, shivering in the keen air, shaky from his awful experience with wood alcohol, mixed with milk.

In blankets, close beside the stove, Billy Larned reclined, an attendant on each side of him. One was a gargoyle with the eyes of a dog; the other a girl with an angelic expression on her face.

Dutch Burns massaged a swollen right hand. Jeanne Lang held the other, battered but unbroken. She hid it and her own under a fold of the blanket, from Dutch Burns.

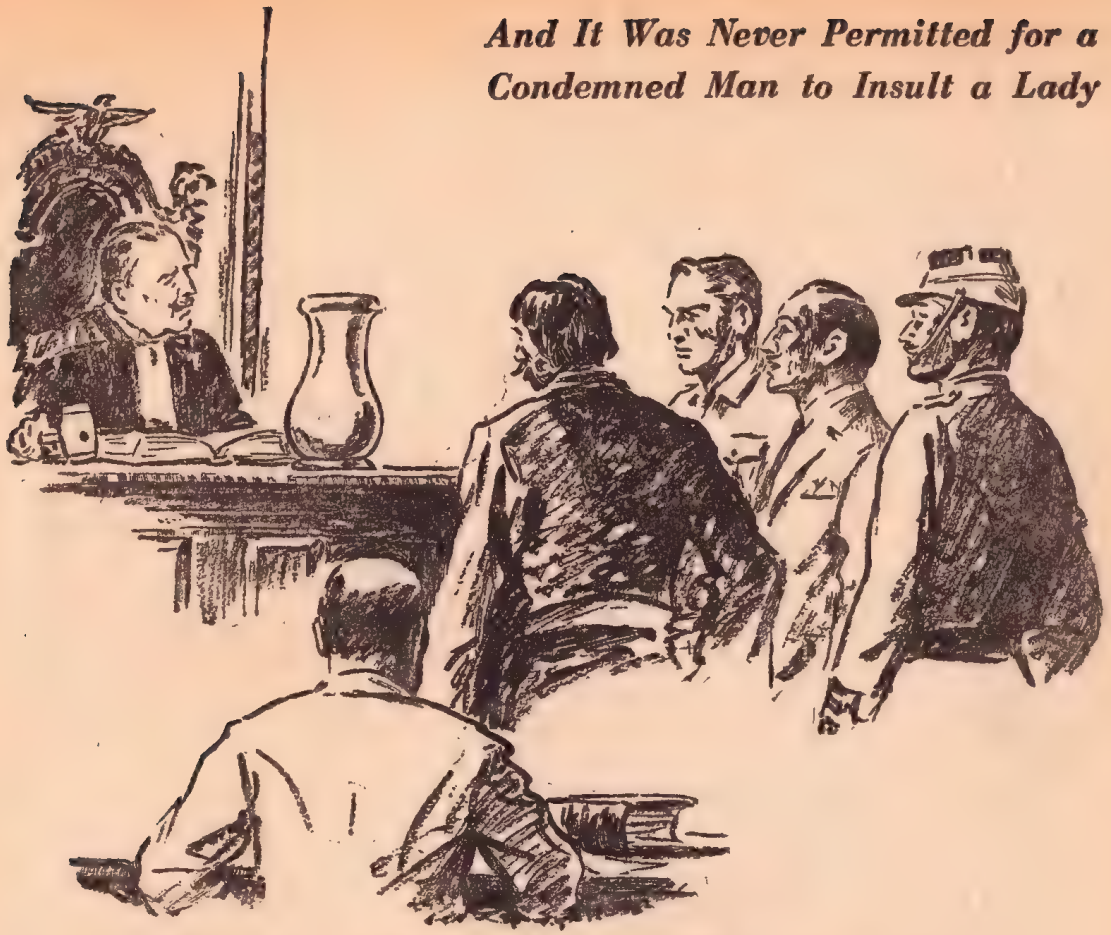
"I said to rough him up," Dutch muttered. "I didn't say to mash your mitts to pieces. It'll be a long time before you use this here right again."

"I can use my left," smiled Billy.

Dutch Burns looked at him, oddly, then at Jeanne, and then he pulled the blanket away and saw how Billy was using his left. He walked out and began talking to the roaring river.

"Cripes what a comeback! And he took it the hard way. He could be champeen of the middleweight division—but he goes and smashes his best hand in a maulin' match for the rights on a dirty river! But, did he put heart into it! I guess, mebbe, if that cute kid in there that's mended his cracked ticker will stick with him, I can manage to patch up that mangled mitt. Cripes what a champeen he'll make!"

And It Was Never Permitted for a Condemned Man to Insult a Lady



THE VASE OF DEATH

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "Thunder Island," etc.

IN THE vase were three balls, one black and two white.

If I drew the black ball, it meant I must die. Three of us were convicted. Manuel Garcia, Arturo Martinez and myself, "Red" Raegan. Three of equal guilt, the law said. But according to Bolivian statute, only one may be executed for a single crime.

The trial was over. Nothing remained except for one of us three to be shot.

"Odds might be worse, at that," I grinned to my attorney. He had done everything he could and I didn't want him to feel low about it.

The *anfora reos,* which means vase of the condemned, was in plain sight on the bench directly in front of his honor, *the judge.* In rapid Spanish the court's clerk was reading the statute which applies to its use. Naturally I understood him, having spent most of my majority as a mining engineer south of the line. "Hard-rock Raegan," they call me, and they'll tell you I'm as tough as any rock I ever cracked. Still, it wasn't easy to keep a stiff lip as I sat staring at that vase. They'll tell you I'm pretty much of a gambler, too. But I like a run for my chips and this game was a bit too simple. You just stick in your thumb and pull out a plum; and if it's black, they shoot you.

The worst of it was that of all the devilment I've done in my day, this time I was

really innocent. My co-defendants, Martinez and Garcia, were guilty all right. Naturally they were glad enough to have me in it with them. Why? Simply because it gave each of them a three-to-one chance, instead of only a two-to-one chance, to draw a white ball from the vase.

"—only for parricide of treason," the clerk was droning. He went on to recite the Bolivian law which abolishes capital punishment except for the murder of a near relative, and for murder connected with a plot to overthrow the government.

Which didn't help me at all, because my conviction came under (b) of that heading.

I looked at warty little Manuel Garcia and saw that he was scared stiff. He sat licking his thick lip and blinking at the vase. Martinez, though, was cocky enough. A sleek *caballero,* this Martinez, with a trick mustache and a wax smile. The *anfora reos* didn't seem to worry him a bit.

He was facing not toward the bench but toward the courtroom. I followed his eyes to a lady in mourning. She was on the rear row and I recognized her as the Señora Eusebio Sandoval, widow of the man for whose murder we had just been convicted. Arturo Martinez' waxen smile did not fade or wince, as his eyes met the lady's. It was like him to be brazen that way.

Under other circumstances, I thought, the Señora Sandoval would have been worth any man's smile. She was about thirty, which isn't too old even for a Boliviana. And her dark, dotted veil quite failed to hide the kind of face we call *muy linda* down here. "Pretty" hardly covers it. She'd assay about ninety percent Castilian, with just enough Indian in her to give mystery and dignity. The lady had style plus, too. According to the papers, that mourning gown she wore had just been airmailed from Paris.

His honor *el juez* was speaking and I faced back toward the bench.

"The execution," he announced, "will be one week from today. Until then, it is the decree of this court that the convicted shall not know which two of them shall live and which one shall die. Therefore they will draw from the *anfora reos* only an hour before the execution. Return them to their cells, bailiff."

Hellish suspense for one week! It was a neat touch, I thought. Even the two of us destined to be spared must sweat for seven days and nights in a death cell. Oh, yes, they know how to punish you in Bolivia —even while they pull their punch.

So we were marched out across the courtyard and back to our cells. Naturally I didn't share a cell with Martinez and Garcia. The warden knew I'd knock their heads together if I had half a chance. For in court I'd accused them of implicating me by deliberate perjury—in order to include me in the roll of guilt.

They were put into a cell directly across a corridor from mine. Through the bars I could see Garcia whimpering like a whipped pup; his once swarthy face was now a blotched gray. But Martinez kept the same suave poise he'd held all through the trial. I saw him light a cigarette and puff cool smoke rings my way. His smile was derisive. If I could have taken just one swift punch at that devilishly handsome face of his, I'd have felt much better.

My attorney followed to my cell for a final, futile condolence.

"Perhaps señor," he offered sadly, "you will draw the white ball."

"Which would save me from being shot," I growled. "But they'd still keep me in prison."

The attorney's face brightened. "Ah, but not for so long, señor! This is a political crime, *verdad?* So the first time there is a change of administration, or perhaps a coup of state—pouf!" He snapped his fingers.

And he was right. My only real peril lay in being shot one week from today. Elections were due next month, with the outs fairly sure to get in. Also, pressure in my favor would in time come from Washington. In the end I was sure to be

released—provided I could draw a white ball from the vase.

The attorney left me.

AND later Johnnie Webb came along. Johnnie was American vice-consul at Potosi, and for weeks he'd been burning the cables to get me out of this. "It's no luck so far, Red," he reported dolefully. "Give me time and I could show results, maybe. But one week isn't enough. After all, you did shoot a cabinet member, and—"

I cut in bitterly. "Blast you, Johnnie, how many times I got to tell I didn't shoot that guy? All I did was stick a gun in his ribs. And how was I to know that he was an assistant secretary of war? I didn't even know I was guarding an arsenal."

Webb's eyes searched me. He knew my record, of course, and I'll admit it was spotty. I'd been mixed up in more revolutions than one, between Panama and the Horn. But this time, so help me, I was absolutely clean.

"Who hired you for this job, Red?" Webb prodded.

"Arturo Martinez," I said. "He knew I was out of work. And he'd heard I'm a scrapper. So he comes to me and says, 'Señor, in the cellar of my hacienda I have gold ore which is stored there pending litigation as to the ownership of a mine from which it came. Bandits may raid it, señor. So I will pay you to guard my house.'

"Well, I was stony broke, so I took this job. There were two guards. The other one was Garcia. Our orders were not to let anyone enter the house. I was standing guard in front when a man rode up on a horse. He insisted on going in. I sad nothin' doin'. He tried to push by me and I put a gun in his ribs."

"And shot him dead," Webb supplied hopelessly.

"That," I contested, "is what Martinez and Garcia claim. But I didn't. It was Martinez who came out and shot the man. Dropped him cold in his tracks there. Carabineros heard the shot and came on the run. They pinched the pack of us, searched the house and found it full of rifles. Not until then did I find out that the dead man was Eusebio Sandoval, assistant secretary of war, and that a revolution had just been nipped in the bud."

Johnnie Webb gave a half credulous shrug. "All right, Red. If that's your story, stick to it."

"If you think I'm lying," I flared, "you can jump in the—"

"Don't get sore, Red," he broke in. "I'll run along now and shoot another cable to Washington."

I had a dismal hunch that it wouldn't do any good. Nothing would do me any good except a white ball from that vase.

SIX days dragged by. Johnnie Webb called only once again, and merely to report no luck with his intercession. My Bolivian attorney called twice; but it was pure courtesy, nothing more. Three times a day a guard brought my meals. A priest came and read me passages of consolation. He did the same for Martinez and Garcia, in the other cell.

Garcia was maudlin by that time. I saw him grovel in his cell, sobbing like a baby, and his funk made me ashamed for all men. But Arturo Martinez kept his bold front. He shaved every day, and I could see him preening his mustache over there.

On the sixth day he called across to me, "It makes a nice gamble, does it not, *amigo?* Like the game of poker. Only there should be five in it, instead of only three. *Que triste!*" His smile mocked me. "Too bad I did not hire two more guards, señor! With five to draw from the vase—ah! such a game would carry only the hazard to be amusing." He shrugged his well-tailored shoulders and flicked ash from his cigarette.

At sundown of that sixth day I had a surprise caller. The Señora Eusebio Sandoval! It jolted me when a guard brought her to my cell. Of all the *gente* in Bolivia,

I would last of all have expected this one.

She came heavily veiled, and in that stunning mourner's gown shipped by air-mail from Paris. More than that, she wanted to be left alone with me a moment. And as the widow of a cabinet member, she was not denied this request.

My first guess was that she had a gun under her cape and was coming in to deal personal retribution. Maybe she didn't like the idea of two out of her husband's three murderers being spared, and so had come to kill us all herself.

Then I realized that the jailers would have that same suspicion. Therefore she was sure to have been searched.

I relaxed as the guard let her in. She advanced to me and I saw again that she was *muy linda.* And vain, too. For even under her mourning veil I saw that her lips were painted carmine, and that she wore bold, globular earrings which might have been pearls. No, perhaps not beautiful; but at least fascinating and mysterious was this Señora Sandoval.

The guards, at her request, withdrew out of hearing for a moment.

Then she said to me, "I come because you were the last to see my husband alive, señor."

"That goes for Martinez and Garcia, too," I said. "We were all there when it happened."

"To them I will make the same request I make of you, señor."

"Which is?"

"That you return to me a ring which my husband wore, and which was missing when they brought his body home. It is the one I gave him at our betrothal. It has value only for me, señor. A prized family heirloom, which a queen of Spain gave to my great grandfather. If you will tell me where it is I will pay a thousand pesos to your estate—and I will say nothing to disgrace your name."

It made me mad, of course. To be convicted of shooting her husband was bad enough. But this boiled me over. "I don't rob corpses, lady. If you've nothing else on your mind, will you please go?"

"I am sorry to offend, señor," she murmured, and left my cell.

I saw her cross to the cell of Martinez and Garcia. The guard admitted her there and withdrew out of hearing a minute. I knew she was repeating her proposition about a lost ring.

I heard Martinez retort coldly to her. He, too, was above stripping a dead man's finger. Garcia wasn't, though. Garcia was a rat. It would have been quite like him to snatch anything of value from the corpse.

If he was guilty of that, fright made him deny it now. I saw Señora Sandoval come sadly from the cell. Then, as she passed my own, I was struck by some faint change in her appearance. Through the veil, her face didn't seem quite natural.

She went on down the corridor and out of sight. And then it occurred to me that her visit here didn't ring quite true. If she suspected one of us of having stripped a ring from the victim, why hadn't she sent an attorney to shake us down?

I SPENT half the night trying to figure that out, then gave it up. Near morning a priest came again. After a solemn half hour with me, he crossed to the other cell. Since it wasn't known which of us was to die, they were treating us quite alike.

Sultry dawn broke through the bars of my window. I tried to hope that Johnnie Webb might show up with some hopeful word at that last minute. But he didn't. No one came except a guard with breakfast. It was an elegant breakfast, the farewell one they serve only to the condemned.

The execution was set for nine o'clock. And at eight they came for us. I was taken out under heavy guard, as were both Martinez and Garcia. All three of us were still in the same boat; it might be Martinez, it might be Garcia, or it might be myself who would draw the black ball.

They marched us out into the courtyard. We had to cross this to reach the

courtroom where that infernal lottery known as the *anfora reos* awaited us. And here, in the courtyard, they gave us another shock. It was all designed, I could see, to castigate those two of us who were to be spared. Right up until the last minute each of us must be impressed by the stark imminence of a penalty which, according to the court's decision, we all equally deserved.

And so we found that a firing squad had already taken position in the courtyard. Ten caribineros stood abreast, at attention. They were facing a blank wall. We three, the convicted, were made to march between that wall and the caribineros.

We were halted by the wall and lined up with our backs to it. I heard an officer shout the command, "Load!"

A rattle of bolts. I saw a shell slipped into each of those ten carbines. But there was no further command. We were simply held there to sweat for a minute. Then an officer of the court appeared and began reading from a paper.

First, he read the verdict of our conviction. Then he read again the statute of the *anfora reos* whereby, however much we all might merit it, only one of us could be executed. During that ordeal I thought Manuel Garcia would buckle. He managed to keep upright, however, although he shivered like a starved dog in a blizzard. Martinez maintained his wax smile and even borrowed a cigarette from his guard. "It may be my last," he murmured. *"Quien sabe?"*

Then we were marched on across the yard toward the courtroom. The firing squad remained at attention with loaded rifles, facing the wall, ready for that one of us who must soon return to them.

In the courtroom, we found a packed house. Even the gallery was filled—and why not? A bullfight would have packed them in. And was not this even more thrilling—this drawing of balls from the vase of death?

The vase, a tall gray vessel about four inches in diameter, stood on the bench directly in front of the judge. It was about a foot deep, I should say, so that a man reaching in for a ball must plunge his forearm to the elbow.

A chatter from the audience hushed as we, the condemned, entered. I saw tension on every face, and particularly on the face of la Señora Eusebio Sandoval. Yes, she was there, in a ailse seat of the third row. And again why not? Who better than herself deserved to attend this climax in the meting of justice?

We three were arraigned before the bench. The judge addressed us briskly, clearly in a hurry to get it over with. First he made us hold up our hands, palms forward, to make sure they were bare. Then he said to us, "You will draw lots from this vase. I will now empty the vase, to show you that it contains three balls, two white and one black."

He did so, rolling the balls out into his hand and exposing them to us. They were quite alike except for color, and each resembled a small agate marble.

His honor *el juez* now dropped them back into the vase.

"You will draw in alphabetical order," he announced. "Gracia, Martinez, Raegan. Manuel Garcia, step forward and draw from the *anfora.*"

With his face twitching, Garcia stepped forward. The top of the vase was just

above the level of his eyes, so that he could not look in. His right arm reached up with the elbow crooked, and I saw it delve into the vase.

It remained there for a breathless minute, as though the man couldn't bear to expose his fate. For Garcia, it meant either salvation or doom. My own pulse was pounding; if he drew the black ball it would all be over. Neither Martinez nor I would need to draw at all.

And still Garcia stood there, with his eyes rolling dumbly, like a man punch-drunk with suspense. Then, slowly, he withdrew his arm from the vase. It came out with the hand clenched, and enclosing a ball.

Garcia held that closed hand in front of the judge; then one by one his fingers spread back to expose the draw.

The ball was white.

I heard a sigh of relief from Garcia. Then a ripple of murmurs ran through the court as this first cord of tension relaxed.

But instantly it tightened again. Martinez must draw next. Then I, Red Raegan, must draw from the vase of death.

I saw the judge take the white ball from Garcia's hand. He held it toward the *juzgado,* which sat in its box at the left, and to the *alcalde* who sat at his right, so that all could witness that it was white. He instructed the clerk to make a record of the fact.

Then he said to us: "Manuel Garcia drew from a vase containing three balls. It is only fair that the others draw under exactly the same odds. One out of three chances for the black ball. Therefore I shall now drop this white ball back into the vase." He did so, then continued. "Martinez will draw next, and then Raegan. If both should draw a white ball, the operation will be repeated until one man draws a black."

That, I admitted, was fair enough.

Martinez stepped forward to the bench. He reached into the vase and his arm disappeared to the elbow. Then promptly it came out—and his hand held a white ball.

"Que suerte!" he murmured. Which is to say, what luck! A laconic devil, that Martinez.

The judge took the ball, exposed it to the court. After recording this draw, he dropped the ball back into the vase.

It was now my turn and I stepped forward. No use making a show of it, I thought. No use thumbing those balls while I wondered which was black. So my fingers closed on the first ball they touched, there in the bowl of the vase.

Out came my hand, clenched over a ball.

I held it in front of the judge. He leaned forward with a morbid interest to see what I would expose. The *alcalde* also leaned forward with a cocked eyebrow, as though I might be showing down a handsomely bet poker hand. The *juzgado* craned their necks from the box. The gallery in general was like the mob at a Roman holiday. Silently attentive, yes, but the silence fairly screamed.

I forced a grin. "Here's my hand, judge," I said, and opened it.

The ball was black.

As black as the pit of hell, that ball was. I felt a chill at the base of my spine. But they mustn't know it. "Hard-rock Raegan's the wrong name for me," I said. "Hard-luck Raegan'd hit me better, judge."

The tension broke. I heard exclaimings from the courtroom. The die of doom was cast now. From the gallery a girl's voice cried: *"Por Dios! El pobrecito!"* From her angle I must have seemed small and forlorn standing there with that black ball in my hand.

The judge took it. He made the clerk record the fact of it and then dropped it back into the vase.

To me he said solemnly. "It is the law, Raegan." He signaled the guards to take me out.

I saw a smile of mock pity on the face of Arturo Martinez. Garcia, near him, was hugging himself at being delivered from death.

The guards, closing about me instantly, marched me toward the courtyard exit. The firing squad was waiting out there. A few minutes more and ten bullets would be fired at my heart.

At a moment like that, a man lives a long time. His brain either goes dead, or it flashes with inspired light. For the first few seconds of that march toward the door, my own was numb. The whole room was blurred. Then out of the blur a face emerged. It was the face of a woman in an aisle seat of the third row. The Señora Eusebio Sandoval.

She had raised her veil in order to see better the color of balls being drawn from the vase. For an instant her eyes met mine. Then they winced away and I followed them to Arturo Martinez. That would have meant nothing—except that all at once I solved a mystery which had puzzled me half of last night.

Last night I'd been struck by some faint alteration in the woman's appearance, after her visit to the cell block. And now the answer pierced me with the sharpness of a sword.

Although guards held my arms, I managed to whirl about and face the bench.

"Your honor," I begged, "may I make one last statement?"

El juez didn't like that. He wanted it over with. "Already you have made statements," he answered tersely, and waved me on.

They dragged me another step toward the exit. But I had something to build a fight on now. So I jerked about again toward the bench. This time I shouted. "If you don't listen, you'll be sorry, Judge. Because you'll find out the truth after I'm shot—when it's too late!"

It was the *alcalde* who interposed. I saw him lean and whisper to the judge.

"Bien," the judge growled. "You may make a last statement, but be brief."

I was led back to the bench.

There I said, "Your Bolivian law permits execution only for two crimes, parricide and treason. Is that correct, Judge?"

His head bowed grudgingly in assent.

"That's all I want to know, Judge," I said. "Then you can't execute me for being present with a gun when a jealous husband was shot by his wife's lover. That's murder, all right, but it's not parricide or treason."

If I'd hit *el juez* with my fist, he couldn't have been more shocked.

The *alcade* exploded, *"Carramba!"* The courtroom broke into an uproar. I took one quick look at the Señora Sandoval and saw her pull the veil down over her face.

The judge pounded for order. He barked at me, "What you can't prove means nothing, young man!"

"But I *can* prove it," I challenged. "What's more, I'll have it proved before those beads of sweat melt on the brow of Arturo Martinez. And before Señora Sandoval can find a veil thick enough to hide her flush."

Truth was, I was guessing. What kept me going was a certainty that conclusive proof, one way or the other, lay right before our eyes; evidence which would either completely establish, or completely deny, my contention.

At that, I don't think the court would have let me proceed if I hadn't been a Yankee. Executing an *Americano* would raise plenty of dust—more if they made a mistake about it.

I talked fast, from there on. "Your prosecutor," I said, "built his case on a theory that Eusebio Sandoval galloped up to the house of Arturo Martinez and demanded entry, on suspicion that the house contained an arsenal of revolutionary rifles; that I barred his entrance with a gun, which is true; that Martinez and Garcia came out to help me, which is also true; that one of us shot him dead, which is also true; and that the house actually did contain revolutionary rifles, which is true *tambien."*

"Then you admit everything!" the judge stormed. He was blazing with impatient anger.

"What I don't admit," I retorted, "is the alleged motive of Sandoval's approach to the house. If he came to seize a revolutionary arsenal, why didn't he come with a troop of soldiers? You forget that he had a beautiful wife; and that his call was at the house of a handsome *caballero*. My charge is that he came to that house not to look for rifles—but for his own wife."

"Stop him!" came shrilly from Señora Sandoval. "It is not truth."

The judge bellowed, "I shall not permit you, a condemned man, to insult a lady. You have no proof."

"Except this—" I said. "Last evening the lady called at my cell. Her excuse for calling was flimsy and insincere, trumped up merely so that she could call next and plausibly at the cell of Arturo Martinez. When she came out of that cell, her face had a different look. Why?"

I turned toward the courtroom and continued quickly, "Because she went in wearing earrings and came out without them. The earrings had seemed to be large imitation pearls. She took them in that way to fool the wardens, in case she were searched for anything she shouldn't be taking into a cell.

"Actually," I asserted, "in her earrings were set white balls exactly like the white balls in the *anfora reos*. She gave one to Martinez and one to Garcia. Garcia had to be protected also, because he knows the truth. Look at him, you can see it on his face now."

Garcia began shrieking about then. *"Por Dios!"* he yelled. "I am only a poor peon. I only do what they tell me—"

He stopped, and it was because Martinez gave him a vicious kick on the shin. I finished in a flash. "Martinez put the white ball up his sleeve. Garcia did the same.

"When each man reached in to draw from the vase, he did not touch the three balls already there. What he actually produced, and exposed to this court, was a make shift earring lately worn by la Sandoval. Believe it or not, Judge. If you don't, take a look in the vase of death."

The judge reached for the vase. I saw him stare into it. *El alcalde* leaned close to peer in also. Then I made a jump to the rostrum for a look myself.

Yes, I was right.

In the vase were five balls; one was black and four were white.

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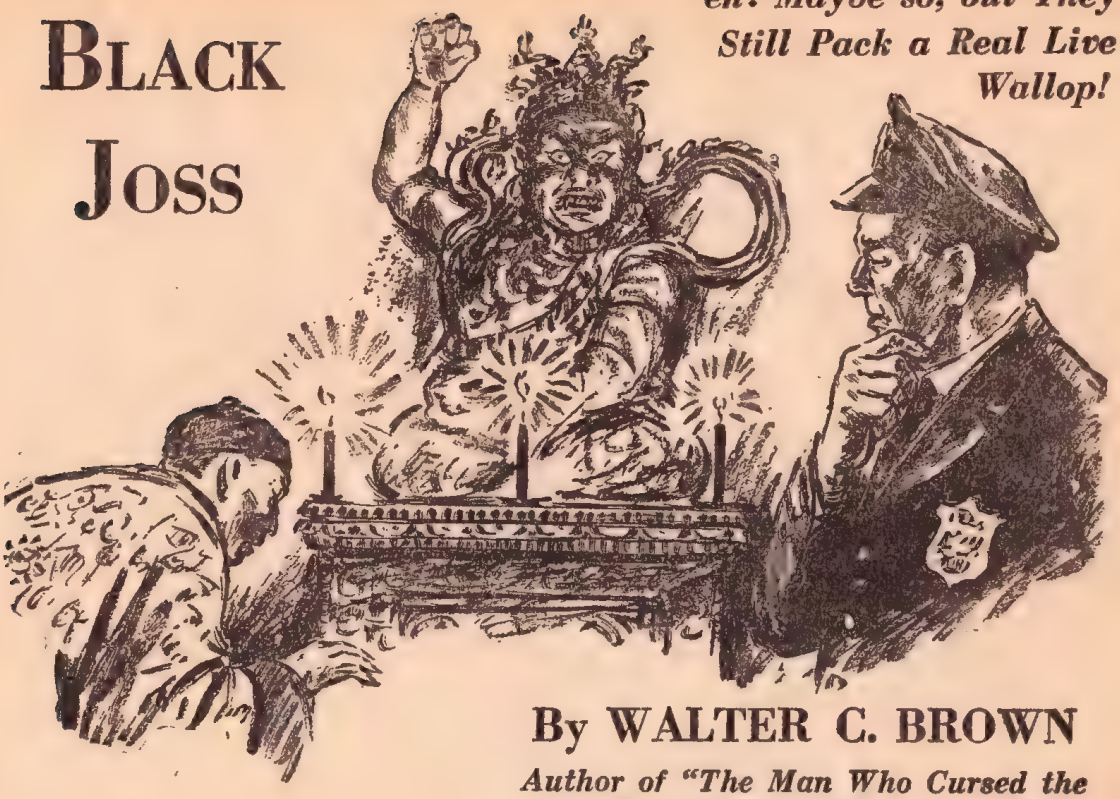
Black Joss

So the Old Gods Are Dead, eh? Maybe so, but They Still Pack a Real Live Wallop!



By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "The Man Who Cursed the Pearls," "King Lee's Death Drum," etc.

HIGH above the shadowy roofs of Chinatown, a star-studded sky hung like a curtain of sequined velvet, with a silvery crescent moon riding high—a moon as thin and curved as the razor-edged Manchu dagger Wong Tin wore in his yellow silk sash.

But henceforth Wong Tin was destined to arm himself with two curved knives instead of one, for on the morrow the great iron gates of Rockhill Pen would swing open, and the dreaded Fang Yat come prowling back to Chinatown like a hungry tiger, seeking vengeance for his seven-year sojourn behind the high stone walls of the White Devils' prison.

And Wong Tin was not the only man in the Yellow Quarter who feared the hour of Fang Yat's release. There were two others who shared in the selfsame peril—his brother Wong Shen, and Meng Tai the old apothecary of Peking Court.

For these three had spoken out before the Rice-Face Law—had given details of Fang Yat's deed of blood, supplying the evidence which had sent Fang Yat to prison, and now each of these three used their last fleeting hours of safety to prepare for the coming days of grim reckoning.

Thus Wong Tin fingered the ivory hilt of his dagger as he sat in the Council Room of the Tsin Tien Tong House on Mulberry Lane, rapping out staccato orders to a dozen picked tongsters, making each man repeat his specific and detailed instructions.

"Wah!" said Wong Tin, when he had assured himself that his arrangements were without flaw. "Let Fang Yat come! He will find himself against a wall of knives!"

Meanwhile, his brother Wong Shen was holding target practice in the secret subcellar of the Wong house on Pagoda Street. Squinting along the barrel of a pearl-handled revolver, Shen took aim at a stone wine-bottle standing on a shelf. A narrow target, that, at twenty-five paces—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

As the noisy explosions echoed and re-echoed, the candle flames whipped to and fro. The stinging fumes of burnt powder reddened Shen's eyelids, for it was a narrow, airless place little better than a cave, with all openings muffled by thick layers of burlap.

"Wah!" said Wong Shen also, surveying with satisfaction the splintered remains of the stone bottle. "Fang Yat will learn that my bullet is quicker than his knife!"

And as he reloaded the gun he could hear a steady hammering in the upper parts of the house, where strong iron bars were being fitted across the windows.

Other ears had heard that brisk hammering, too, and knew its meaning—the sharp ears of Sergeant O'Hara and Detective Driscoll of the Chinatown Squad, as they stood in moonlit Pagoda Street, looking up at the busy silhouettes moving behind drawn shades.

"Damn queer, how news like this gets around in Chinatown," O'Hara remarked. "The notice about Fang Yat's release didn't reach my desk till this morning, but the Wongs started putting up those bars yesterday. They're not taking any chances. They haven't forgotten that Fang Yat swore a blood-oath to revenge himself on every one who testified against him at the trial."

"Well, he's had seven long years to cool off," Driscoll remarked. "According to the Warden's report, he's been a model prisoner."

"Yeah, so he'd get out sooner," O'Hara replied. "He's a scheming Chink, Driscoll—dangerous as hell. Smooth tongue and fast hand. He should've been put away for life. He's killed before, and he'll kill again."

"Well, Wong Tin's got the whole Tsin Tien outfit back of him," Driscoll said. "If trouble starts, I'd say it was Fang Yat who'll be needing protection. What can one man do against a Tong?"

"You don't know Fang Yat," O'Hara answered. "Odds mean nothing to that slick Chink. We'd better go over to Peking Court and tip off Meng Tai, the apothecary. He's No. 3 on Fang's list."

THE apothecary's blue-painted door in Peking Court swung open in response to O'Hara's knock, and Meng Tai greeted them with a polite bow, his shrewd old eyes peering through iron-rimmed spectacles.

"Just wanted to warn you that Fang Yat comes out of prison tomorrow," O'Hara told him. "We'll be keeping an eye on him, but it's best to be on guard, Meng Tai, till we see which way the cat jumps."

"Gracious thanks, Sah-jin, for your words of warning," the apothecary replied. "The whisper of this sorrowful fact has already reached my ears, and I am prepared for trouble."

"You have a bodyguard?" O'Hara queried.

"Aye, Sah-jin," Meng Tai nodded, smiling, "and one to make even Fang Yat think twice before he sets foot in Peking Court!"

"Okay," said O'Hara, and the wily old apothecary chuckled to himself as he locked his door again and returned to his work-room, a chamber as strange as the den of a medieval sorcerer. For Meng Tai, having no skill with either knife or gun, had arranged his own peculiar means of defense against the threatening shadow of Fang Yat.

When the Brothers Wong had urged him to follow their example and have iron bars set to his windows, since his quarters on the ground floor looked out upon a little walled garden, Meng Tai only smiled and shook his head.

"Let each man fight with the weapon that best fits his hand," the apothecary said, and taking hammer and nails, proceeded to nail down his windows—all save the middle one, which he left temptingly raised a few inches. But an almost invisible cord stretched from that window to the lid of a round woven basket lying on the floor below.

Slowly and carefully now Meng Tai raised the prepared sash. The straining cord jerked the lid from the round basket, and the sleek, jet-eyed head of a hooded cobra swayed erect, hissing as it flicked its forked tongue.

"Wah!" Meng Tai chuckled, hastily cramming the lid back on the lethal basket. "The *naga's* tooth is no thicker than a needle, but it carries death as swift and sure as the thrust of a six-foot spear!"

And no doubt Fang Yat the killer added another *"Wah!"* to the general chorus as he stood on the edge of Chinatown the following afternoon. Fang Yat was tall for an Oriental, lean-faced and hawk-eyed, and carried himself with a haughty pride that transcended the coarse, ill-fitting prison-made garments which had been Rockhill's parting gift.

Before him stretched Mulberry Lane, cutting slantwise through the heart of Chinatown, like a bar sinister. Fang Yat looked long and intently at the busy, crowded street, but he did not choose to advertise his return by marching along Mulberry Lane. Instead, he took a roundabout course which brought him unobserved into Canton Street, and to the house of Ah Lum, where he had formerly lodged.

"Hola, Ah Lum!" he called out as the door opened, but the paunchy proprietor of the Palace of Dreamless Sleep did not return the cheerful greeting. Instead, Ah Lum gave his visitor a cold and stony stare, and endeavored to close the door in his face.

"Hai! What means this?" Fang snapped angrily. "Have your eyes gone blind? It is I—Fang Yat—come to claim my old lodgings."

"Away! Go away!" Ah Lum hissed, pushing against the door. "There are no vacant *k'angs* in this house."

"You lie!" Fang Yat snarled, trying to force the door.

"I—I dare not open to you!" Ah Lum stammered, resisting the move. "I have been warned, Master—every one has been warned. A Tsin Tien messenger has gone everywhere, saying 'If Fang Yat knocks upon your door—give him shelter at your peril!' I—I dare not disobey, Master. The Tong has many eyes, and a long arm!"

"Fat-bellied rascal!" Fang Yat spat, striking at Ah Lum's face, but the paunchy Celestial cried "Be warned, Master—while there is yet time. I speak as your old friend. No house will dare give you shelter. Wong Tin's men are keeping watch everywhere for you. *Hoya!*—even now there is one watching this door—"

Fang Yat swung around, swift eyes scanning the street. Midway of the block, a yellow man in a dark blue *shaam* lounged in a doorway, smoking a bamboo pipe.

"He is a Tsin Tien man!" Ah Lum whispered, and seized the opportunity to slam the door on his unwelcome visitor and drop the bolt.

Cursing, Fang Yat rattled the knob, then turned and glanced sharply toward the stolid-faced tongster, and his scowl gave way to a slow, crafty smile. With an air of stealthy caution, he left Ah Lum's house and drifted along Canton Street, sliding into the opening to Manchu Place.

But once within the narrow bricked passage, Fang Yat instantly flattened himself against the side-wall, waiting. A few moments later the inquisitive yellow face of the Tsin Tien spy peered around the corner.

"Hai!" Fang Yat chuckled as he caught him by the throat and slammed him back hard against the wall. Gasping, the startled tongster plucked a knife from his belt, but Fang's lightning hand check-mated the thrust in mid-air.

A TWIST—a sharp cry of pain—and the knife was in Fang Yat's possession.

"Bungler!" Fang sneered. "It is lucky that I have foresworn the paths of violence, or your life would pay for your lack of skill."

So saying, Fang Yat tossed the knife over the nearest wall. "Return to your coward

masters and tell them there is no need to spy upon me, for I walk unarmed. Aye! But let Wong Tin and his brother Shen and Meng Tai the bearded fool beware, for I have a weapon stronger than knife or pistol or silken noose!"

Black eyes smoldering with long-distilled hate, Fang Yat's fingers tightened their hold on the tongster's *shaam*. "Seven years have I spent in the stone-wall *yamen* because of their wagging tongues. Now for seven days and seven nights I shall burn the Black Joss of vengeance. Aye, let them be warned! Yo Fei the Destroyer shall give judgment between my cause and theirs!"

The tongster stared as if he could not believe his ears. Fang Yat the killer—the Number One master of the knife—babbling of vengeance by prayer and joss-stick! *Hoya!* The long years in the White Devils' prison must indeed have cooled the dragon-blood that once flamed like fire and struck like lightning!

"Be off!" Fang Yat said sharply, giving him a shove. "And if you bungle my message, I will slit thy ears!"

And Fang Yat, watching the tongster's hurried departure, chuckled and laughed as he made his way toward Orange Street and the Plum Blossom Joss House, with its paint-blackened windows, its gilded doorway and ever-burning lantern of peacock-blue glass.

With a quick glance up and down the street, Fang Yat ascended the brownstone steps and entered, peering along the dark hallway, sniffing the spicy fragrance of joss-stick and incense candle. But stealthy as was his entrance, a silken curtain rustled and old Loa Poh the *bonze* advanced to meet him, a startled look coming upon the old man's wrinkled face as he recognized his visitor.

"Greetings, Venerable," Fang Yat said, bowing. "It is only a matter of hours since the gates of the White Devils' stone-wall *yamen* opened for me, and my feet hasten to the House of Prayers. I wish to burn scented joss before Kwan-Yin and beg forgiveness for my past deeds of violence."

"It is a worthy thought, my son," Lao Poh answered gravely. "I rejoice that thy feet return to the honorable paths of righteousness. It is truly said that the river makes a thousand turns, but it comes at last to the sea."

"Thy words are pearls of wisdom," Fang Yat replied. "And if I am overlong at my prayers, Venerable, it will be because I have a seven years' debt to make up."

So Fang Yat ascended the stairs to the Hall of the Immortals, casting his eyes swiftly along the row of screened shrines. Then he drew a deep breath of relief—nothing had been altered in the intervening years. There were the same silk-hung shrines—of Kwan-Yin, of Milo Fo, of Tao the Just, of Liu Hai the Money God. And the alcoved shrine of Yo Fei, Lord of Sudden Death, on whose grim altar Black Joss must be burned—

Fang Yat's eyes took on a sudden glitter as he stared at the life-sized figure of the Bringer of Death—at the clenched black fist solidly outthrust before the frowning black face—but he checked his impulse to make a profound kowtow, for he heard the whispering pad-pad of the *bonze's* slippers behind him on the stairs.

Instead, Fang Yat knelt in prostrate devotion before the shrine of Kwan-Yin, the gilded Lady of Mercy with the calm, inscrutable smile. And old Lao Poh, observing Fang Yat's deep absorption, nodded his head approvingly as he turned about and made a noiseless retreat.

Marking the *bonze's* withdrawal by a sidelong glance, Fang Yat sat up and turned back a corner of the prayer-mat, eagerly counting the floorboards. Then he drew out his penknife and stealthily set to work on the tenth board from Kwan-Yin's pedestal.

"Hai!" Fang exclaimed softly as the board came loose without much resistance, for its nailheads were false. Lifting it aside, he plunged his hand into the cavity beneath.

"Hai!" he chuckled again as he drew out a thick packet of Rice-Face banknotes—precious loot he had cached there seven years before, when the Blue Coat Devils had been hot on his trail.

Fang Yat peeled off a thick wad of bills, thrust them into his pocket, and put the others back in the hiding place. He replaced the board with extreme care, even to re-filling the cracks with dust.

Then Fang Yat straightened the prayer-mat, sitting cross-legged and at ease, gazing into the distance and smiling as one who sees a silken future stretching ahead. And presently he rose and stole quietly down the stairs, but the sharp-eared old *bonze* heard him and came out to intercept him.

"Have you finished so soon, my son?" he inquired, rebuke in his tone. "A short prayer brings a short answer."

"Indeed, I have scarce begun, Venerable," Fang Yat answered smoothly. "I did forget in my haste that I still wear White Devil clothing. I go now to purchase garments more suitable for a true Son of Han, but I will return within the hour."

FANG YAT made his way along Mulberry Lane to the Happy Dragon Emporium, where the sudden hush which descended upon the slant-eyed clerks told him that he was recognized.

But quite unabashed, and haughty as a red-button mandarin, Fang Yat set about refurbishing himself from top to toe. The cheap cotton suit was replaced by a gaudy robe of shimmering yellow silk—the clumsy prison shoes by brocaded Canton slippers—the cloth cap by a round Chinese hat of fine black felt.

"Take these White Devil rags and cast them into the fire," Fang Yat directed, spurning the discarded clothing with his foot. *"Tsai!* They are not fit even for a coolie!"

And true to his word, Fang Yat returned to the Plum Blossom Joss House, where he resumed his devotions in such a lengthy manner that even the rigid standards of old Lao Poh were satisfied.

When twilight came to the crooked streets of Chinatown in a tide of creeping purple, Fang Yat left the Plum Blossom again and strolled toward Long Jon's famous Tea House on Mulberry Lane. From all directions heads turned and slant-eyes stared at the glistening yellow robe cutting its path through the more sober-hued *shaams,* and excited whispers sprang up behind him—"It is Fang Yat! *Aya!* Fang Yat has returned!"

And Fang's entrance into the popular Tea House drew the same hushed attention as in the Happy Dragon shop some hours before. But, haughtily ignoring the stares and the silence that was like a caught breath, Fang Yat strode to a booth at the far wall and clapped his hands sharply to summon Long Jon the proprietor.

"Let a Number One feast be prepared, sparing no expense," Fang Yat commanded in lordly style, and Long Jon bowed and hurried into the kitchens, from which presently issued a parade of choice Oriental

dishes that would have drawn a beaming smile from the round-paunched Belly God himself.

There was trepang soup and pickled oysters—a whole Peking duck boiled in rice

wine and stuffed with bamboo sprouts and water-chestnuts, with side dishes of crisp *pao tzu* and candied pork fat.

With a seven years' appetite to satisfy, Fang Yat ate greedily of every dish, with steaming pots of fragrant *lung ching* tea between courses, and a stone flagon of *maygolo*—a rare brandy made from sweet aniseed.

Smacking his lips over this rich repast, Fang Yat rose, paid his reckoning with the same lordly air, and swaggered out into Mulberry Lane. But it was soon made plain to Fang Yat that he was marked for a pariah. A grim smile settled upon his lips as he saw how old acquaintances sidled from his path—how the passersby gave him clear passage on the crowded streets—for the Tsin Tien Tong casts a long shadow.

Then Fang Yat turned the corner into Pagoda Street, intending to swagger past the house of the Wong Brothers, as a sign of his contempt for their power, but he had not taken ten steps before a pair of beady-eyed tongsters loomed up out of the shadows, closing in on either side of him with brisk determination.

"*Chan-choh!* Halt!" came the terse command. "This street is forbidden to you, by order of the *tu-chun* Wong Tin. Turn back!"

"*Hoya!* I shall walk where I choose!" Fang exclaimed. "By the Rice-Face Law the streets are free to all."

"Be warned, Fang Yat!" came the answer. "Enter at your peril!"

Fang Yat scowled at the two tongsters—at the half-drawn knife in the hand of one—at the bamboo whistle poised on the lips of the other—but they matched him stare for stare, grim and unyielding.

"*Wah!*" agreed Fang softly, and turning away, made a quick detour through the next street and approached Pagoda Street again from the opposite end. But there, too, he was met by the same challenging "*Chan-choh!*" And Peking Court, where Meng Tai the apothecary lived, was also barred to him—at each of the three narrow entrances tongsters kept alert watch, with their crisp "*Chan-choh!*— Turn back!"

"*Wah!*" said Fang Yat at the last barrier, and turned away like one who has completed a necessary but tedious ritual. With liesurely pace he turned his steps toward the Plum Blossom Joss House, but as he neared the blue-glowing lamp which marked the gilded doorway, a heavy hand descended upon his shoulder, and a White Devil voice spoke his name—the voice of Sergeant O'Hara.

Fang's slant eyes narrowed as he faced the tall, red-haired Blue Coat Devil who had been his Nemesis in the old days, the thrice-accursed *kwei* who had persuaded the Wong Brothers and Meng Tai to testify against him.

"*Hola,* Sah-jin," he said, and added drily, "Long time no see."

"Well, let's take up where we left off," O'Hara said, swinging the yellow man around and making a quick search for concealed weapons. "I'm surprised," O'Hara admitted, on finding nothing. "I thought you'd have a couple of knives on you, just from force of habit."

"Not so, Sah-jin," Fang Yat replied blandly. "I do not break the Rice-Face Law again. It is written that time brings wisdom, and I am now seven years wiser. In future my steps follow the paths of peace and righteous living."

"Yeah?" O'Hara smiled. "What's in that package under your arm?"

"Only joss-stick, Sah-jin," Fang Yat replied, and obligingly displayed a score or more of little black candles under a wrapping of cotton-wool.

"*Black* joss!" O'Hara corrected, and his voice sharpened. "So you're burning black joss, eh? Listen, Fang, you're not fooling me with all this smooth talk about reforming. I know what black joss means—it's for Yo Fei, God of Murder!"

"I burn Black Joss—*wah!*" Fang replied stolidly. "Is it a thing forbidden by the Rice-Face Law?"

"Look here," O'Hara said with grim

briskness, "let's get down to brass tacks. I know damned well that you've cooked up some scheme or other against the Wong Brothers and Meng Tai. If you're wise, you'll forget it. The odds are all against you. And get this, Fang—if anything should happen to those three—*anything*—I'll be right on your tail, and don't kid yourself that you can cover up by some phony alibi. Start something, and you'll be back inside Rockhill before you can say chop suey—Savvy?"

"*Wah!*" said Fang Yat, and smiled a bland, mocking smile. "The scroll of tomorrow is hidden from all men's eyes."

"All right, I've warned you," O'Hara said crisply. "If you've got any brains, you'll get out of this Chinatown—and stay out."

Fang Yat's face settled into stern lines. "Sah-jin, the hour of my departure is already fixed. For seven days and seven nights I will burn Black Joss to Yo Fei, and if Yo Fei answers not, then I shall depart from these streets. *Wah!* Thus have I sworn."

"So you're going to *pray* your enemies to death, eh?" O'Hara scoffed. "You're just going to sit and burn joss, eh? You wouldn't help Yo Fei along by a little quiet knife-work on the side—would you, Fang?"

"Yo Fei needs no help of mine," Fang Yat declared, tucking the black joss under his arm. "I go now, yiss?"

O'HARA stood watching as Fang Yat vanished through the gilded doorway. "I'd better have that Chink tailed night and day," he said to himself. "He's got some scheme for revenge up his sleeve, and with seven years in jail to think it over, I'll bet it's a damn good one!"

But when Sergeant O'Hara looked over the subsequent reports of Driscoll and Burke, who shared the assignment to keep an eye on the movements of the notorious knife-man, a puzzled furrow etched itself between O'Hara's brows.

"There's just nothing to report on, Sarge," Driscoll explained. "Fang Yat stays in the Plum Blossom Joss House all the time, prayin' to Yo Fei, just like he said he would—"

"You mean to say he *never* comes out?" O'Hara interrupted.

"Only once a day," Driscoll declared. "Along about sundown he strolls over to Long Jon's Tea House for a fancy meal. Then back he goes to the Plum Blossom, and stays there."

"It's damn queer!" O'Hara muttered. "Fang Yat and a joss house just don't match up. That yarn he pitched about the black joss is just so much eye-wash, and you can bet your bottom dollar on that."

"Maybe he sticks close to the joss house because it's the only safe place he can find," Driscoll suggested. "Wong Tin's gang means business. There's a couple of Tsin Tien men watchin' that joss house night and day, just like we are. The first time Fang Yat takes a walk through a dark street, he's a dead pigeon!"

"All right," O'Hara agreed, "but why all this hocus-pocus with the black joss? That's the part I can't figure out. . . . I think I'll drop in at the joss house for a look-see."

Old Lao Poh made no objection to the Red-Hair Sah-jin entering the House of Prayers, but as they went up the staircase he warned O'Hara that silence must be maintained in the Hall of the Immortals. He would show him Fang Yat at the shrine of Yo Fei, but it was forbidden to interrupt anyone engaged in prayers.

"Okay," said O'Hara, walking on tiptoe to match the old *bonze's* noiseless steps. Then Lao Poh halted, silently pointing to the shadowy alcove where Yo Fei stared with his black frown and outstretched, threatening fist. Fang Yat lay prostrate at his feet, his robe a yellow blur in the gloom, his hat and slippers neatly ranged beside the prayer-mat.

On the altar three black joss-sticks smoldered, giving off a bitter fragrance, while

from each candle a strip of black paper hung down, marked with Chinese writing in bright yellow ink. If Fang Yat was conscious of their presence, he gave no outward sign, no slightest turn of the head, no least movement of hand or foot.

In spite of himself, Sergeant O'Hara was impressed by the silent tableau. In the clear daylight of Orange Street or Mulberry Lane one could easily smile at all talk of the old gods of China, but in this house of brooding hush, with the glowing tips of joss like beady red eyes watching from the grim shadows of the Lord of Death, a vague uneasiness distilled itself from the very air—

Returning to the *bonze's* private quarters downstairs, O'Hara asked a number of searching questions about Fang Yat's conduct, but Lao Poh's replies only served to confirm the official reports. Fang Yat left the Plum Blossom only once each day, to take rice. At all other times he huddled before the shrine of Yo Fei, praying, praying, praying. Night and day the three black joss-sticks burned on the altar of vengeance. As soon as a joss burned out, another was instantly lighted.

"I don't get it," O'Hara muttered to himself as he left the Plum Blossom. "Tigers don't go in for prayer-books—"

And there were others who watched and waited even more uneasily—the three slant-eyed Sons of Han whose names Fang Yat had written on the black scrolls dangling from the Black Joss of Yo Fei—Wong Tin of the knives, Wong Shen of the pistol and Meng Tai of the coiled cobra.

TRUE, Meng Tai the apothecary went about his business much as usual, but whenever he left the guarded confines of Peking Court a Tsin Tien tongster walked five paces ahead of him, and another one five paces to the rear.

But the Brothers Wong kept to their carefully guarded house on Pagoda Street, restless and uneasy despite the armed tongsters pacing to and fro in the street outside, despite the double locks on their doors and the iron bars on their windows.

And when there came a sudden rapping on their door one evening, Wong Tin's hand clutched the curved knife and Wong Shen's hand grasped the pistol, but it was only Captain Yuan of the tongster guard come to report that Fang Yat still burned his black joss in the Plum Blossom.

"Wang pu tau!" the elder brother cursed, for it was now the fourth night of the Black Joss, and the strain of hidden menace was beginning to play tricks with his nerves.

"Must I live shut up like a prisoner?" Wong Tin shouted angrily. "Am I not *tu-chun* of the Tsin Tiens—with half a hundred fighting men at my command? Have I not offered five hundred silver pieces to any man whose knife speeds this cursed Fang Yat to his worthless ancestors?"

Captain Yuan shrugged. "None dare perform a deed of blood in the House of Prayers, *tu-chun.*"

"But he is not always within the Plum Blossom," Wong Shen put in. "Does he not venture out every day to take rice at Long Jon's?"

"True," Captain Yuan replied, "but he goes there while it is still daylight in the streets, and the Blue Coat Devils follow at his heels. Night and day they watch him, even as we do."

"Tsai!" Wong Tin snarled. "Shall one lone man make mock of the power of the great Tsin Tien Tong? Fang Yat must die! With every day that passes I lose face."

"Better loss of face than loss of shadow," Captain Yuan said grimly. "Let him burn his black joss, *tu-chun.* What have we to fear from prayers? The old gods are blind and deaf and toothless with age."

"But we do nothing!" Wong Tin burst out angrily. "We hide behind bolts and bars as though the house were besieged by an army."

"Patience, *tu-chun,*" Captain Yuan advised. "Fang Yat will grow weary of his black joss, and take the matter of vengeance

into his own hand. *Wah!* Let him come to seek us out! I await the hour with impatience!"

The Brothers Wong exchanged uneasy looks, not sharing Captain Yuan's enthusiasm over the prospects of a personal encounter with the notorious master of the knife, but they said no more, and Captain Yuan went on downstairs in search of a bottle of rice-wine.

Then Wong Shen bade his brother goodnight and retired to his own room, but Wong Tin, plagued by uneasy thoughts, continued his restless pacing to and fro. The house grew hushed and still, but the silence brought no comfort to the *tu-chun's* fraying nerves. Indeed, his ears magnified the small noises of the night into sinister sounds—the faint snapping of a board made him hold his breath, the stirring of the night-wind became stealthy footsteps—

Thump!

Wong Tin nearly jumped out of his skin at the sudden thud behind him. With a jerking leap he spun around, bright steel flashing instantly in his hand—

There was nobody behind him—nothing more threatening than a small blue Kang-hsi vase which had fallen from its pedestal to the carpeted floor. But Wong Tin stared at it suspiciously, puzzled that it should have toppled over of its own accord.

"Tsai!" Wong muttered, bending over to pick up the vase. And then something had him instantly by the throat—something lithe and swift and merciless that dragged him down to his knees, that throttled the rising scream in his throat and plunged him headlong into swirling darkness even as his curved Manchu dagger hacked wildly through the empty air—

SERGEANT O'HARA had just passed the Little Shanghai Restaurant on his midnight rounds when he heard the shrilling of a police whistle. "Pagoda Street!" O'Hara sharp ears told him, and blowing his own whistle in reply, he broke into a run to answer the summons.

Midway of the block a broad blade of light slanted out from an open door—the door of the Wong's house, and he found Driscoll in the center of an excited, chattering knot of Tsin Tien tongsters.

"Wong Tin's been murdered!" Driscoll announced, and O'Hara shouldered the yellow men aside and followed him up the stairs to the room where the dead *tu-chun* lay sprawled face down on the floor, the curved knife still clutched in his hand.

The tongsters came crowding into the upper hallway, but none ventured to cross the threshold of the death-room except Captain Yuan, his eyes round as jade buttons, and Wong Shen, huddled in his silken night-robe, his face drained to grayish pallor by fright.

"Fang Yat! Fang Yat kill him!" Wong Shen shrilled, over and over.

Driscoll motioned brusquely to Wong Shen and Captain Yuan to leave the room. "This is going to be one hell of a nut to crack, Sarge," he said when they were alone. "Look at the screwy set-up—Wong Tin strangled in a room built like a bank vault—iron bars on the windows, a double lock on the door."

Driscoll went over and tapped on the window bars. "It's a cinch nobody could squeeze in between these bars. That leaves the door—but the door was locked. Captain Yuan had to smash his way in. So how did the killer get in here, and how in hell did he get out again?"

O'Hara knelt down beside the body, examining the red welt circling Wong Tin's

throat. Beside the outflung arm lay a length of red silk rope, like a limp snake.

"Here's another queer angle," Driscoll went on. "Fang Yat is a knife-man, and Wong Tin was strangled. How about that?"

"So what?" O'Hara replied. "Fang Yat can change weapons, can't he? What happened looks plain enough to me—Fang left the Plum Blossom, threw Burke off his trail long enugh to pull off this job—"

"Well, I still don't see how he worked it," Driscoll said, but O'Hara waved the question aside.

"That part can wait, Driscoll. The first thing is to get our hands on Fang Yat. He'll have a fancy alibi, no doubt, but we'll bust it wide open! We'll sweat the truth out of him!"

Leaving Driscoll to look after the corpse, O'Hara hurried over to Orange Street, where Detective Burke had been stationed on point duty at the Plum Blossom Joss House. "Too bad it wasn't Driscoll on watch there tonight," O'Hara muttered. "Well, the old *bonze* can tell me what time Fang Yat started out—"

But to O'Hara's amazement, he found Burke in his usual spot opposite the joss house—in a shadowed doorway which commanded a view of both the front and side entrances to the House of Prayers.

"Nice work, Burke!" O'Hara snapped. "What were you watching tonight—the stars? Fang Yat's on the loose—Wong Tin's been murdered—and here you stand, like nothing's happened!"

"But listen, Sarge, nothing *has* happened—not here!" Burke stammered. "Fang Yat hasn't showed his nose all night, and nobody's gone either in or out of the Plum Blossom during the last hour! I'll swear to that on a stack of Bibles!"

O'Hara stared at him for a moment, then swung around and strode up the brownstone steps of the joss house, where his knock was answered promptly by Lao Poh.

"No, Sah-jin, Fang Yat has not stirred from his shrine of Yo Fei," the old *bonze* assured him. "He still burns his black joss—aye. You can come upstairs, Sah-jin, and take look-see."

And Lao Poh conducted him to the Hall of the Immortals, where indeed Fang Yat crouched in suppliant prayer before the Lord of Sudden Death, while the black joss glowed like three tiny ruby eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned!" O'Hara swore under his breath. Then Lao Poh beckoned him to withdraw, but he rained questions upon the *bonze* as soon as they were downstairs again.

Lao Poh, however, was prompt and positive in his answers. He declared flatly that Fang Yat had not stirred from the Plum Blossom, and offered to swear to the fact by any oath the Sah-jin might propose, for he had been in and out of the shrines a dozen times, and had Fang Yat disappeared for as little as ten minutes, it would have been noticed.

O'HARA was silenced by this unexpected collapse of his theory, for the word of Lao Poh was beyond all doubt or questioning. The old *bonze* was incorruptible—it was absolutely unthinkable that he would lie to shield any one, rich or poor, high or low.

"Damn it, Driscoll, I can't get heads or tails out of this set-up," O'Hara growled on his return to the Wongs' house in Pagoda Street. "Burke swears that Fang didn't stir from the joss house, and old Lao Poh swears Fang didn't even move from in front of the Yo Fei shrine. How in hell can I crack an alibi as tight as that?"

"You can't," Driscoll said. "Maybe you've got Fang Yat on the brain, Sarge. He's not the only tricky Chink in Chinatown. These Wong Brothers—they've pulled off some pretty sharp deals—they've got plenty of enemies. It would be a swell opening for a smart killer—he'd know we would try to pin the rap on Fang Yat."

"I see you've got something on your mind, Driscoll," O'Hara replied. "Go ahead—spill it."

"Well, Sarge, this looks like an inside job to me. We know the window bars are okay, but the locked door—we're taking Yuan's word about that—"

"The other tongsters bear him out," O'Hara put in.

"Yeah, but they're Yuan's men," Driscoll argued. "He's a Captain of the Tsin Tien Tong, and with Wong Tin out of the way, he's right in line to be the next *tuchum*. How's that for motive?'

O'Hara thought it over, then shook his head. "My money's still on Fang Yat."

"But how are you going to pin it on him?" Driscoll demanded. "Looks to me like we're stalled behind the eight-ball."

O'Hara gave a grim smile. "You know the old Chinese saying—Time holds the key to every lock. If I'm right about Fang Yat, he'll try to strike again, and soon, because four of his seven days are gone. And Wong Shen stands next on the list—"

But Wong Shen needed no warning from the Blue Coat Devils. The mysterious murder of his brother, despite all their precautions, had put him in a sweating fear for his life. He dismissed Captain Yuan's men and selected other tongsters to take their places. They formed a defensive square about him wherever he moved, so that he was never alone.

All Chinatown buzzed with the mystery of Wong Tin's death, and during the next day many slant-eyed worshippers came to the Plum Blossom to burn a handful of paper prayers—and to steal sidelong glances at the yellow-robed avenger still prostate before the glowing black joss—but only *two* sticks now!

The death of Wong Tin made no visible difference to Fang Yat's routine. All day long he kept to the shrine, and whether he slept or prayed at any given moment no man could tell, for he neither moved nor turned his head. And at the usual time he arose and went to Long Jon's for his evening rice, sitting silent, grim and inscrutable in his usual booth.

Those who saw Wong Shen reported that his eyes were red-rimmed and staring; he had not dared close his eyes in sleep since the murder of his brother. All night long, they said, Wong Shen sat bolt upright, his back against a wall, a pistol ready in his hand.

BUT neither stone walls nor iron bars, neither the cold steel of his tongsters' knives nor the gray-nosed lead of Wong Shen's bullets were powerful enough to save him from the long arm of Yo Fei.

Wong Shen met his appointed doom—murdered as swiftly, as brutally as his brother had been—and with even more of mystery, for he died between two locked doors, in a room that had no windows whatever!

This death-chamber was the storage room behind the basement shop of Quam Lee the coffin-maker of Mandarin Lane, where Wong Shen had gone to inspect the coffin specially made for the burial rites of Wong Tin.

Quam Lee had labored unremittingly on the fine double-box—sawing and planing and doweling, for like a true Oriental craftsman he despised the use of nails. And when Wong Tin's "wooden robe" was finished, he sent word to Wong Shen.

Wong Shen chose the dead of night for his visit of inspection, when the streets would be quiet and deserted. Then he set out, hurrying along with Tsin Tien tongsters walking before him and after him and on either side.

Mandarin Lane was silent as a street of the dead, with no light anywhere save the dim yellow flame burning in Quam Lee's window. The whole party crowded into the basement shop, filled with the pungent smell of wood-shavings and lacquer, and weary-eyed Wong Shen spoke words of praise for the Number One workmanship of the coffin—the inner box smooth as yellow satin, the outer case of ironwood, polished to the gleam of burnished metal.

The coffin stood on trestles in the little back room, and Wong Shen signaled his

guards to withdraw, so that he might dedicate the massive death-box by burning a packet of red paper prayers.

So Wong Shen closed and locked the door, and there was complete silence from the inner room, while the tongsters stood talking together in lowered voices and Quam Lee busied himself putting his tools in order.

Then came a sudden heavy thud from behind the locked door—a wild threshing about as though two wrestlers were locked in mortal struggle—and then the muffled blasting of pistol shots, fired as swiftly as a frantic finger could press the trigger.

"Hai! Hai!" the startled tongsters yelped, hurling themselves against the door, which buckled and cracked, but held fast until Quam Lee snatched up a wooden mallet and smashed at the panels.

"Ai-yees!" the tongsters wailed, rooted to the threshold by fear and bewilderment, for Wong Shen lay sprawled on the floor—dead, even as his brother had died, with a red welt about his throat and a length of red silk cord lying beside him.

Wong Shen's hand still grasped the emptied gun—the air was acrid with powder fumes—and a thin plume of smoke still rose from the blackened prayer-papers smoldering in a jade bowl standing on the coffin-lid.

But there was no living creature in in that room—that bare, narrow space between two locked doors, where even a mouse could not hide itself!

The abashed tongsters hung back, staring at each other in panic fright. "It is the work of *kwei*—devil demons!" one muttered, and another whispered "It is the hand of Yo Fei!" But Quam Lee dashed out into the moonlit hush of Mandarin Lane, screaming "Poh-liss! Poh-liss!"

"IT'S the Wong Tin case all over again!" O'Hara exclaimed, as he and Burke bent over Shen's body. Then he began snapping questions right and left. No, the tongsters assured him, Wong Shen's body had not been touched. No one had so much as set foot across the threshold—

O'Hara's sense of utter bafflement grew even stronger as he listened to the details of Wong Shen's visit. The rear door of the room was secured by a stout wooden bar—there were no windows at all, only one little air-vent less than a foot square, too small for even a child to squeeze through.

"If you ask me, Sarge, I'd say this beats the job in Pagoda Street," Burke declared. "Both doors bolted, and no windows! That's one for the book!"

O'Hara straightened up. "Well, take over here, Burke. I'm off to the Plum Blossom to check up on Fang Yat. We'll see if he was burning his damn joss *this* time!"

But Driscoll, whose turn it was for point duty at the joss house, swore that Fang Yat had not left the Plum Blossom, and old Lao Poh gave Fang the same ironclad alibi as on the night of Wong Tin's murder—Fang Yat had not stirred from the Yo Fei shrine.

"How about it, Sarge?" Driscoll asked. "Still sold on Fang Yat?"

"Hell, yes!" O'Hara exploded. "You'll see, Driscoll—Meng Tai will be next on the list. We've got to move fast to save him."

"That's easier said than done," Driscoll remarked. "Here's two gone, and we don't even know how the jobs were pulled. What's to keep him from making it three in a row?"

"Brains!" O'Hara said grimly. "Listen—Fang Yat said he'd burn the black joss for seven days. Okay—six of the seven are gone. That means we've got to pull Meng Tai through the next twenty-four hours—and I'll do it! There'll be no slip-up this time!"

"How?" Driscoll asked.

"I'm going to Meng Tai's house—*now!*" O'Hara replied. "And I'm staying right there at his side till further notice. But keep that under your hat, Driscoll. Tell no one, not even Burke. You'll hear from me tomorrow—written orders."

So Sergeant O'Hara was mysteriously

absent from the Squad Office all next day, but a China-boy brought a sealed message to the Precinct—Burke and Driscoll were to report at sundown to Meng Tai's house, while Officer Faraday was to take the Plum Blossom watch, checking on Fang Yat through the bonze every fifteen minutes.

The two detectives were prompt at the Peking Court rendezvous, where Meng Tai conducted them into his strange lair, O'Hara making his appearance from behind a devil-screen stretched across one corner of the room.

"All quiet so far," O'Hara informed them. "Now here's the plan for tonight. Burke, you patrol the front of the house. Driscoll, you take the side and the garden wall. Keep your whistles handy, and shoot if you have to. I'm staying right here with Meng Tai—but hidden behind the devil-screen."

Driscoll nodded, grinning. "I'd like to see the Chink who can outsmart that set-up, Sarge!"

"And that isn't all," O'Hara continued. "There's another little surprise waiting for our slant-eyed Houdini. All the windows are nailed shut except that one in the middle. Anybody who wants to break in has to climb through that middle window, and it's a mantrap."

O'Hara pointed out the cord running from the sash to the round woven basket on the floor. "There's a cobra inside that

basket—a live cobra. Stand back, now, and Meng Tai will show you how it works."

Beaming with pride, the apothecary stepped forward and raised the window. The lid jerked from the basket—but nothing happened! The cobra did not even raise its head, its speckled brown coils lying relaxed and motionless.

"Hai!" Meng Tai exclaimed, nudging the basket with his foot.

"It's either asleep—or dead," O'Hara declared.

Meng Tai bent over the basket, his hand darting down expertly to seize the cobra just below its ugly head. He turned the dangling snake this way and that. Then a startled look came into his eyes.

"Chandoo, Sah-jin!" he said excitedly, sniffing at the cobra's head. Then he squeezed open the fanged jaws and sniffed again. "Aye—*chandoo!"*

"Opium!" O'Hara echoed in surprise. "How could anybody get close enough to that cobra to force dope down its throat? . . . Meng! When did you last see the cobra?"

"Last night," Meng Tai stammered. "I give him a pigeon egg to eat. I have not opened the basket since then."

THE three Blue Coat Men exchanged glances in silence, then O'Hara straightened up briskly. "All right, men, get to your posts! It looks like we're going to see action tonight!"

O'Hara bolted the workroom door upon their departure and moved the devil-screen to a more advantageous position.

"Now listen, Meng Tai—no one's going to get in here, cobra or no cobra, so stop shaking and try to act natural. Light your lamp and sit down there at your table. Smoke your pipe—keep yourself busy—but don't speak to me—don't even turn your head toward this screen. You're all alone in this room—get the idea? And keep calm. I'm on the watch every second, with a .38 in my hand!"

"Wah!" said Meng Tai, but he was trembling as he lit his green-shaded lamp. The sinister discovery of the drugged cobra had taken all the stiffening out of his spine,

and he sat with the staring pallor of a condemned man who strains his ears for the footsteps of approaching doom.

In that silent room time passed as slowly as a camel caravan plodding across the ancient yellow sands of the Gobi—the hours marked only by the solemn tolling of the iron-tongued bell of St. Mary's. A brooding hush reigned everywhere—sounds of traffic died away—doors and window shutters banged shut for the night. Somewhere on the other side of Peking Court a moon-fiddle wailed—

O'Hara kept watch through several small holes in the rice-paper panels of the screen. Meng Tai sought to busy his trembling hands by making up a batch of the pain-killer pills for which he was famous. The clicking of his pestle in the stone mixing bowl filled the room with sound.

Random thoughts passed through O'Hara's mind. . . . No word from Faraday at the Plum Blossom. Evidently the quarter-hour check-up on Fang Yat was working— If they could see Meng Tai through to dawn, he believed the apothecary would be safe.

Fang Yat had set his seven-day limit for the black joss, and if Yo Fei were to strike again, it must be tonight, for the Elder Gods could not be permitted to lose face by being late in their work—

Then O'Hara heard a stealthy sound, and stiffened into instant alertness. It was a faint sound, hard to define, impossible to locate. He peered out tensely, but could see nothing. Meng Tai, still busy with pestle and mortar, had not noticed it.

But nothing happened. The sound ceased and silence reigned again. Meng Tai began to roll and shape his pellets between a pair of wooden spatulas, placing the pills in orderly rows on a piece of oiled paper.

Plop!

Meng Tai jerked upright, startled by the sudden noise. A stone bottle had toppled to the floor from his workbench near the windows. The cork had come out and a thick green liquid began to ooze over the straw matting.

"Tsai!" the apothecary muttered, hastening to pick up the draining bottle. And then it happend, right before Sergeant O'Hara's staring eyes—Meng Tai bending over to pick up the bottle—a long bamboo rod sliding into the room over the open sill, a hollow rod with a noose of thin, tough rope at its end!

A quick flip, and the noose had settled over Meng Tai's head—the cord jerked tight, dragging him to the floor before he could utter even a gasp. But the deadly efficiency of the strange weapon was attested by the tortured writhing of Meng's body as he sought to claw from his throat the terrible, choking coil that tightened and tightened without mercy.

And in that very flash of time Sergeant O'Hara grasped the mystery of Wong Tin's death—how he had been strangled despite the barred windows of his room—how his brother Shen had been murdered in the room behind the coffin-shop, windowless, yes, but that one small air-vent had been large enough for this deadly fisherman whose rod was baited with a noose—who killed despite bolt and bar, and then flung a length of red silk rope beside the body to further baffle the Blue Coat Devils!

With one sweep of his arm O'Hara hurled the screen aside and sprang to the apothecary's rescue. And it was no more than the nick of time, for Meng Tai's eyes were already bulging, his tongue protruding, his face turning purple with congested blood—

O'Hara tried to ease the noose, but its coil was buried deep into Meng Tai's flesh, and the cord ran up through the hollow bamboo, so that there was not even an inch of slack. And the bamboo rod itself, for all its lightness, was strong enough to resist his utmost efforts to snap it off.

Nor did O'Hara's unexpected appearance on the scene disconcert the killer. With brazen determination to finish his deadly work he stood his ground, a lean

black shadow looming up beyond the sill, nothing of him visible save the yellow hands that directed the lethal bamboo.

With Meng Tai's life measured now in seconds, O'Hara jerked upright, leveled his .38 at the shadowy killer and pulled the trigger.

The room echoed with the rattling explosions, and glass fell in a tinkling shower as his bullets raked the window.

SNARLING and cursing, the killer dropped the bamboo rod and fled into the darkness, while O'Hara knelt and dug frantically at Meng Tai's throat to ease the choking pressure. But the very moment the cord was loosened O'Hara sprang to the window and scrambled out in quick pursuit.

Driscoll's flashlight was already sweeping over the deserted garden, for he had scaled the brick wall at the sound of Hara's gun.

"Look up, Sarge—*up!*" Driscoll shouted, for his swinging beam revealed a long length of knotted rope dangling from the rooftop. O'Hara's gun spoke again, and Driscoll's shot came like an echo, but the dark figure swarming up the rope wriggled onto the roof in safety, hauling the knotted rope after him.

"It wasn't Fang Yat, Sarge!" Driscoll cried. "No yellow robe! I had my beam square on him!"

"No yellow robe!" O'Hara repeated, and then he exclaimed "That's it! The yellow robe! Now I've got it!"

"What?" Driscoll asked, but O'Hara did not take time to answer. He was already at the garden gate, fumbling it open. "Look after Meng Tai!" he called back over his shoulder, and darted away.

O'Hara pounded full tilt across the darkness of Peking Court, into the narrow passage that led to Mulberry Lane, his flying steps rousing sharp echoes as he dashed past Long Jon's Tea House, past the Tsin Tien Tong House and the Little Shanghai —on into Orange Street, where the glass lantern over the joss house door loomed up like a peacock-blue moon.

A tall shadow detached itself from a doorway and blocked his path—Officer Faraday. "Sergeant O'Hara!" he exclaimed, startled. "What's up, Sarge?"

"Fang Yat!" O'Hara panted. "He just tried to bump off Meng Tai in Peking Court. He got away—over the roofs! He'll be heading this way!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Faraday protested. "Fang Yat's still in that joss house, or else the *bonze* is a Number One liar! I've checked on him every fifteen minutes, like you ordered."

"There's no time for argument!" O'Hara snapped. "I'm telling you Fang Yat's on the loose! Get your gun out and keep watching those roofs up there! The roofs —that's how he gets around!"

And O'Hara dashed on toward the joss house, shouting for Lao Poh as he flung open the inner door. "We've been tricked!" he called to the startled *bonze*. "That black joss alibi of Fang Yat's is a fake!"

"But how can this be, Sah-jin?" Lao Poh gasped. "Fang Yat is even now at the shrine of Yo Fei. It is not two minutes since I myself saw him!"

"Then look again!" O'Hara said, and they hurried up the stairs.

"There, Sah-jin—did I not speak truth?" Lao Poh demanded, pointing to the yellow-robed figure bowed before the shrine of Yo Fei, with the brocaded slippers and black hat placed neatly beside the prayer-mat.

"Watch!" O'Hara said tersely, and stepping forward, launched a kick that lifted the yellow robe clear of the floor and sent it spinning against the wall—a yellow robe stuffed with odds and ends of rags to resemble the figure of a man prostrated before the shadowy altar.

"It's nothing but a dummy—a stuffed dummy!" O'Hara said. "That's the fake alibi Fang Yat set up every night, while he sneaked out a back window and got away over the roofs. That's why he bought a

bright yellow robe. He had this all planned from the beginning. He knew it was forbidden to speak to any one burning joss!"

And O'Hara told the *bonze* about Fang Yat's knotted rope, and the deadly bamboo rod with which he went fishing for his selected victims—

"But wait—you'll see for yourself!" O'Hara said. "Fang will race back here as fast as he can, to try and save his alibi. I'll put the dummy back and we'll hide."

He restored the yellow robe to its previous position and they drew back into the Kwan-Yin shrine, watching and waiting. A few minutes later they heard the stealthy slide of an opening window. The wall-draperies billowed snakily in the brief draft, and then Fang Yat crept into view, casting quick, cautious glances around him.

"Wah!" Fang breathed fervently, seeing no one, and scurried to the Yo Fei shrine, loosening his black *shaam* as he reached for the bright yellow robe—

"Hola, Fang Yat!" O'Hara called, stepping into view, and the yellow man spun around with a snarling oath. The next moment he had made a leaping bound toward escape, but O'Hara caught him by the arm and pinned him against the wall.

"Yang kwei tzu!" Fang hissed, and there was the instant flash of steel in his hand. O'Hara's fist, however, was a split second faster, landing an uppercut flush on the yellow man's jaw. Fang Yat sat down with a thump, half-dazed and unresisting as the knife was wrenched from his hand.

"Let's see what else you've got," O'Hara said, making a quick search that yielded a second knife and another length of red silk rope. "All cut and measured for Meng Tai, eh?" O'Hara said grimly. "All right, you can get up now—but no more tricks, savvy?"

Fang Yat stood up, a little unsteadily, holding his jaw. *"Ai-yee,* Sah-jin, you have a fist of iron. Always you are Number One bad luck for Fang Yat. *Wah!* I fight no more. What man can strive against the Lords of Destiny?"

BUT O'Hara kept a wary eye on his prisoner as he handed the two knives and the red silk cord to the *bonze* and asked him to summon Faraday from his post outside.

"Aye, Sah-jin, I go with all speed," Lao Poh replied, and hurried toward the stairs.

"I warned you, Fang," O'Hara said. "I told you what would happen if you tried to get revenge. Pretty smart stuff, that yellow robe and black joss—but not quite smart enough. It'll be a long, long time before you burn another joss-stick!"

Fang Yat scowled at the altar where a single black joss-stick still smoldered, almost burned out. And with sudden rage he knocked it to the floor and stamped it under his feet.

"Tsai! My curse upon the old gods!" he snarled, shaking his fists at the frowning statue of Yo Fei. "They are all blind and stupid with age, so that they fight for the White Devils against the Sons of Han. *Tsai!* The Black One has mocked and cheated me—I spit upon his worthless altar!"

And Fang Yat in his seething rage added deed to word, then snatched up the remaining sticks of black joss and crushed them to powder in his hands. But with treacherous cunning he turned like a flash and flung the black dust full into O'Hara's face.

O'Hara staggered back, his eyeballs stinging as though pierced by a hundred needles, and all sight was lost behind a curtain of searing crimson. Fang Yat's mocking laugh rang out as he jumped clear of the blinded detective's sweeping grasp.

But Fang Yat had forgotten his yellow robe—that fateful yellow robe which lay in his path. His feet became entangled in it—he stumbled to his knees, and at the sound O'Hara flung himself forward in a diving tackle that brought Fang Yat into his grasp once more.

With the fury of a wildcat and the strength of a maniac, the yellow man fought to free himself from the White Devil's grip. He bit and gouged and

flailed with his fists—by sheer fury he managed to regain his feet, with O'Hara still holding on. They swayed to and fro, locked in a desperate matching of brute strength.

Straining with every ounce of desperate fury, Fang Yat tried to break the grip of his blinded foe by a series of terrific backward jerks, and when that failed, he sank his teeth into O'Hara's wrist.

"You dirty yellow devil!" O'Hara cursed through clenched teeth as the loosened *shaam* began to tear loose from his faltering grip.

Feeling himself on the very threshold of escape, Fang Yat braced his feet and jerked back with the mightiest tug of all. The *shaam* ripped loose, but Fang Yat staggered and reeled under a jolting blow that shook him from head to heels—

"O'Hara grunted as he felt Fang's body grow suddenly limp. He let the sagging yellow man slide to the floor, and bent down quickly, groping for Fang's right wrist and left ankle. He brought them together and snapped on the handcuffs.

"There! That'll hold you!" O'Hara muttered. Then he heard Faraday's footsteps on the stairs, but as he straightened up, his head bobbed back from a sudden nudging blow.

Groping into the red mist that stretched before his swollen, streaming eyes, O'Hara's hands touched something cold, hard, solid as metal.

He grinned then, for he knew what it was he touched. It was the great clenched fist of the statue of Yo Fei, thrusting out black and menacing from his shadowy shrine—the same black fist which had caught Fang Yat's head in full force as he jerked back in that last desperate break for freedom.

"So the old gods are dead, eh?" O'Hara chuckled to himself. "Maybe so—but they still pack a real live wallop!"

In Your Next Issue of SHORT STORIES, January 25th, 1942

GRAND "HASHKNIFE" NOVEL . . .

"They had ridden all day in the choking dust and heat, and they wanted to quench that thirst in the one saloon in Isabella . . . No night herding for them!"

So thought those two hard-hitting partners, Hashknife and Sleepy . . . but their fond dreams of taking things easy were doomed to disappointment!

For they were destined to ride into sudden mystery, Where phantom hooves thundered through—

"THE VALLEY OF VANISHING HERDS"
By W. C. TUTTLE

Skookum Chuck Pass

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Blind Man's Buff," etc.

IN THE Chinook jargon, skookum chuck means strong water, and if you've ever seen the water boil through the five miles of winding channel between the mainland and Gilbody Island you'll understand why the natives called it Skookum Chuck Pass. White men have stood on the sheer cliffs and looked down on the tide rips and breaking waves, and they've seen masses of kelp tied into intricate knots by the black currents, and they've searched their brains for a more expressive name, but in the end they agree the natives were right.

Other white men, in heavily powered fishing boats, have approached the pass entrance and considered gambling a boat to save the forty mile run around Gilbody Island, then shaken their heads. If the waters will stand a hundred foot fir tree on end, then suck it from view, and later toss it to the surface, shattered and free of bark, what might they do to a boat?

I'm a fisherman on the purse siener *Jack Byrne* and our operations during the salmon run on Puget Sound are pretty much the same. We put out around a quarter mile of net across the channels the salmon follow; they always swim against the current. The boat, moving slowly, brings the two ends of the siene together. A line, running through rings on the bottom of the net, is hauled tight, closing the net. It is the same principle you saw in your great-uncle Enoch's drawstring purse.

The salmon are hauled aboard and the operation is repeated until the boat has a load or the fishing peters out. There is a shrinkage after fish are caught. That, and the element of freshness, is the reason a purse seiner speeds his catch to the buyer. Four hours makes a difference, and many a time I've seen Big Bill Jenner glance speculatively at Skookum Chuck and slowly shake his head. "It can't be run," he would growl.

Big Bill stood six feet two inches and he was as wide as a seiner's hatch and weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds. When he dressed in yellow oilskins, hip boots and a sou'wester, he loomed up like a pinnacle rock in a fog. He owned the *Jack Byrne*. The seiner had been built to his own specifications and she could weather any kind of storm, but Big Bill was convinced the Skookum Chuck was too much for her.

At the time she was launched, Little Bill, his son, was seventeen. When he was twenty-one Little Bill stood six feet-three and weighed two hundred and forty. He had thick, powerful wrists, and his fist was better than five inches across at the knuckles. He was Big Bill's first mate and the Skookum Chuck was a constant challenge. "It can be run," he would say, then look at his father, and you could see the light of the born gambler flame in his eyes.

"You're young and foolish," Big Bill would say. "But I know how you feel. I was your age the first time I saw that channel, and secretly I figured the skipper was yellow because he went around Gilbody Island. I still feel as if the Skookum Chuck was always knocking a chip off my shoulder, but—I won't let it trap me. That's where sound judgment comes in."

I'll bet Big Bill told Little Bill that a hundred times. Inwardly he was afraid his son would attempt the run some time when he wasn't aboard. At length he made him

promise he wouldn't run it. "I won't tackle Skookum Chuck unless it is dire emergency," Little Bill promised. Now the father feared the son would invent an emergency.

Big Bill accepted the promise, knowing it was the best he could expect. They were pretty close and the father believed freedom of action bred confidence and resourcefulness in the son. He didn't feel he should hedge him in with a lot of orders.

When fishing was slack or the tide wrong, Little Bill would take the skiff and row ashore. We would see him climb the trail to the cliffs the deer had made before white men came. He would walk along, studying the currents, and sometimes he would sit for a half hour watching the way

the water boiled around a submerged ledge. He even sketched the channel and plotted a course. On his return he would say, "Skipper, I can run her."

And Big Bill would answer, "No you can't, son."

This might have gone on until Big Bill was old enough to retire, but for something that happened.

THE country was pretty wild on the mainland side of the channel. There were miles of virgin timber the loggers hadn't reached. It was tapped by a single road. This skirted the channel. Sometimes it was on the ragged edge of the cliffs. Again it would be a quarter of a mile back. The builders had had an idea of dumping logs into the Skookum Chuck and saving the cost of constructing a railroad into the stand. When they saw what happened to the logs they dumped that plan was settled. The road was abandoned, but the Forest Service kept it open as part of their fire-fighting plans.

Steve Cronin, a fish buyer, heard about the road and figured he could put one of his big trucks over it. It was slow work, but he made it. He had some piles driven in a little cove at the north end of Skookum Chuck, put in some pontoon floats and told the purse seiners he would pay them the market price for fish delivered there.

It saved the fishermen a couple of hours and gave Steve an edge on his competitors. Whenever we put in we'd usually find his big truck backed up against the shore end of the gangway. A rusty scales stood on the float, and nearby were boxes with heavy handles used to carry the salmon from the scales to the truck.

We would throw the salmon from the boat to the box while Steve counted the fish. Weight and numbers would be entered on the tally sheet and the box set aside. When the fish were unloaded, there was a little extra in it for the boys who helped Steve pack the fish to the truck. Generally two of us would take one end of a box and Little Bill the other. He claimed he should have been paid double for two men's work, but if Steve had offered him extra he would have been sore as hell.

Steve paid for his fish in five and ten dollar bills. This was to enable Big Bill to pay us off on the spot. It was a pretty fine set-up all around.

There was a lot of horse play between Little Bill and Steve. Steve would say, when we docked before he showed up, "So you ran the Skookum Chuck, Bill? I didn't think it could be run. Well, it looks as if I'd have to get down here earlier."

And Bill would answer, "It can be run."

Big Bill, leaning out of the wheelhouse window, would smoke his pipe and say nothing—and mighty little of that.

We tied up one morning ahead of the seiner, *Ancutty,* and went ashore to stretch our legs. The switchback down to the cove was a good two miles long as it had been built for logging trucks, and we could hear Steve's motor backfiring as it braked against the compression.

The clouds were down to the timber and occasional whisps of vapor blotted out everything in the cove. "It's foggy up there," Little Bill said. "He seems to have stopped."

"I've heard him come down in weather thicker than this," I told him. "Steve claims the front wheels of his truck know the way."

"He's got a new truck," Little Bill observed, with a trace of a grin. "The price of salmon's high and our hauls are big. The two don't often go together."

The new truck had been long in coming. It could haul heavier loads. We listened. It was quiet up there in the fog. "I don't like it," Little Bill said. "I can't hear his motor running."

"He throws the ignition switch when he comes down," the engineer said. "He told me so."

"But if he had nosed into the bank he'd start the motor to back out," Little Bill argued. "And if he'd gone over the grade

we'd have heard the crash. That's a hell of a big truck and it would take a lot of trees to stop it."

He started to walk up the road then, growing worried, pulled off his rubber boots, shed the slicker, and trotted ahead in his socks. In a few minutes we heard him coming back. He was running, and his big feet splashed through puddles in the wheel ruts. "Steve's been slugged," he panted. "Don't know whether he's dead or not. His billfolds are gone. A couple of you boys go up and bring him down. I'm going after the man who got him."

"What do you mean?" Big Bill asked.

"I'm running the Skookum Chuck," he answered, then added, as he remembered his father was master, "with your permission, sir."

As they hurried aboard, Big Bill said, "What makes you think a chance like that will help Steve?"

"It's a long haul to the highway," Little Bill explained, "and the one place where a man could get the drop on Steve is a thousand yards up the road. At that point he has to crawl to make the hair pin turn. The slugger could climb over the tail gate, slip up, hit Steve, grab the wheel and nose the truck into the bank. It's soft and at the slow speed there wouldn't be a crash. That's what happened. He'd then climb up a game trail to the road where he had his car cached in some thicket and head for the highway. But it will take time, and if the fog's thick he'll crawl—"

That was all Big Bill needed. "Take the wheel," he said. He yelled, as I cast off the lines, "We're running the Skookum Chuck. If any of you men want to go ashore, step lively."

There wasn't a man aboard who gave it a thought. I know I'd felt the Skookum Chuck's challenge a long time. And I wanted to settle the issue once and for all. As we put about I looked astern and saw the two men we'd left ashore hurrying up the road to do what they could for Steve.

All hands turned to and lashed down nets and gear, then everyone was ordered inside. A couple of minutes later we were for it. The boat was broadsiding and Little Bill rang for more speed to get the steerage way that would straighten her out. Now he had it. The walls on either side shot straight upward and vanished into the low-hanging fog. I could hear the hiss of water on either side of us and see it twist, turn, and even roll over as it followed the walls.

Big Bill said nothing, but it seemed to me his teeth were clamped down harder than usual, on his pipe stem. He wouldn't utter a word of command, I knew, because he realized Little Bill, if anyone, could take the boat through. No man, white or native, had given the channel as much study.

Little Bill was *reading* the water as the river men do, judging it by its color, though here depth wasn't involved so much as currents. He pulled the wheel over hard, swung almost to the opposite wall, then sent the bow into a smother of white water. I could have touched the wall at this point by leaning out.

Big Bill stopped smoking, then he looked hard at his son. The current was carrying the boat across the channel and hurling it at a submerged ledge. Little Bill sent her ahead at full speed, and she cleared the ledge by a couple of feet. Big Bill grinned. That was seamanship in any man's language.

I glanced ahead and saw the whirlpool described by men who had looked down from the cliffs. Little Bill tried to crawl along the outer edge of it. There was water enough between it and the wall, but

unseen currents tore at the hull with a million fingers, then pulled it in. I saw the outer water climb high above the rail, yet it didn't spill over. We slipped to the bottom, and slowly the bow and stern revolved around an imaginary axis amidships.

I heard something clatter to the deck. It was the bowl of Big Bill's pipe. He spat out the stem and looked at his son. I recalled Indian legends of sub-sea monsters that reached up and pulled down craft that entered the Skookum Chuck—monsters that chewed fir trees to shreds.

Little Bill rang for full speed astern and, looking back, I saw the boat's stern go into solid water. It was a curious thing to watch—water that seemed to disobey the law of gravity and hang above us. The bow swung slowly around. We were going astern with relation to the water, but circling with relation to the walls. Little Bill stopped the engine, then ordered it ahead at slow speed. We made three, then four complete revolutions before I noticed we were climbing. Looking down I could see drift sucked from view in the center of the pool.

We moved east, then north, then west. As we turned south, Little Bill rang for full speed ahead. The bow shot beyond the influence of the pool, and the churning propeller kicked through the last of the revolving water and bit deep into the solid water below.

Little Bill's expression didn't change. His massive hands gripped the wheel-spokes until the knuckles were white under the tightly drawn skin.

It looked to me as if we were crashing, bow-on, into a protruding portion of the westerly wall. On the opposite side a rock cleared the white water like a fang. There couldn't have been more than sixty feet between them. Little Bill rang for full speed astern. There was plenty of power in the boat, but it didn't have a chance against the current. We kept going ahead, but the engine checked the drift enough for the bow to swing clear of the west wall, and drip from it fell to the deck as we passed.

The rest was white water that piled over the bow and flooded the well-secured nets astern. Suddenly the walls fell away and we were through. "Take the wheel, sir," Little Bill said to his father. Then to me, "I'll need a heaving line."

While I got the heaving line, Big Bill pulled on a pair of shoes. Most of us had shed our hip boots in case the boat went down, though we knew actually we wouldn't have a chance to survive in such water. I got into a pair of shoes and when Big Bill put the boat's bow alongside a rock in slack water I followed his son ashore.

HE TOOK the heaving line and began running up the steep slope. I followed, not with any heroics in mind, but to see the outcome and lend a hand. He outdistanced me the first hundred yards and when I reached the first sheer climb, he had already tossed the heaving line to the limb of a tree growing from the bank. The lead had fouled the line and limb and there was no danger of the line slipping.

He went up, hand over hand, his feet finding holds on the wall. He disappeared into the fog and I followed. The climbing called for hands and feet all the way up. It leveled off two hundred feet above the water and the fog thickened until I couldn't see fifty feet ahead.

"Keep the roar of Skookum Chuck directly behind you," he called back, "drive straight ahead, and you'll hit the road."

I had an easier way. I followed his tracks. The roar was growing fainter when he stopped. I was dizzy from the effort, and my heart was pounding in my ears. Even Little Bill was breathing hard. He listened a moment, then worked his way along the road until he found a windfall. He picked up the smaller end and carried it around until it was across the road. "Does that look as if it had fallen across?" he asked.

I nodded. "You've left some tracks," I told him.

He took a handful of dead brake ferns and wiped out his footprints, then joined me. "Are you sure he hasn't passed?"

"Only one set of car tracks going in," he answered. "In most places the truck tracks have wiped them out. Our quarry hasn't come out yet."

We listened and in about ten minutes we could hear a car coming. It was crawling through the fog, the driver evidently having a time of it as he was running in second gear. "Leave everything to me," Little Bill said.

THE car came out of the fog and I saw the driver leaning out of the window watching the road. He stopped suddenly and began cursing. It wasn't the cursing of a man suddenly annoyed. Rather it was that of a man driven to desperation by the delays of nature and his own tense nerves. There was nothing specific about what he said. He was piling word on word.

He put on the brake, left the gears in neutral, and climbed out. He was a big fellow and his eyes were cold and calculating.

Little Bill nudged me in the ribs and winked. As the fellow began pushing the windfall clear of the road, Bill stepped up behind him. The man whirled and started to go for a gun in a shoulder holster, then realized he didn't have time.

I knew by the way he put up his hands that he was a trained fighter. Bill realized it, too. It didn't bother him any. He pawed away, confident his strength would pull him through, and willing to take a few hard punches to get in one. The man's narrowed eyes studied Bill behind his lifted hands. "What's this? A hold-up?" he asked.

"You figure it out," Bill answered, then they were at it.

He had a mean left hand that kept exploding in Bill's face. It was a jab that traveled little more than nine inches, and I saw the strategy—blind Bill, then finish him off. Bill kept right on pawing away and it was a good four minutes before he saw his chance, then he swung with everything he had in weight behind it. That wide fist smashed through the other's belatedly raised guard, spread his nose all over his face, cut the upper lip, loosened teeth and almost knocked him out. Before he could recover Bill hit him again. This time it was flush on the jaw and I saw the fellow's feet leave the ground before he started falling.

He fell face downward in the road and I thought he surely must be dead. Little Bill was worried. Heretofore, when he had been in fights, he had pulled his punches. Literally he hadn't known his own strength. "Is he dead?" he asked me.

"I don't think so," I answered, "but he'll never be the same again." I rolled the man over. "Maybe he isn't the one."

"He's the one," Bill answered. "Steve is the only man who ever uses this road. There's a fence across it near the highway, and a sign that says, 'Private Road' so people won't take it, meet Steve and have to back up for miles."

He searched the man's pockets and removed a thick wad of bills. "Threw the billfolds away, most likely," he said. He walked over to a clear puddle of water and brought back enough in his massive hands to sluice off the man's face.

The fellow opened his eyes and I saw his fingers go toward the shoulder holster. "I took it," Bill said. "You knocked a friend of mine in the head. Nearly killed him."

BILL'S eyes were slits as he made the comment and I knew that he hoped to trick the man into believing his victim would identify him. He said nothing and I sensed he was confident Steve would never identify him. Bill looked on this as proof the fellow had slugged Steve without warning. "We'll go back now," he said.

He walked over to the car, released the brakes and pushed the back wheels into

the ditch. Then he picked up the front end and carried it around. This done, he rested his elbows on his legs, grasped the rear of the car and lifted it onto the road, his legs, rather than back and arms supporting the weight. "You watch him," he said to me, "I'll drive."

It was slow work, but we reached the stalled truck and the fellow said, "I'm Joe Brandon. I'm an honest citizen. I've been assaulted, robbed and kidnaped, and somebody is going to pay plenty for this."

"When you've proved all that in court," Bill said, "send the bill to me and I'll pay it." He made Brandon get out. He tied his hands and feet with tough sailor knots that would stay, then he secured him to the nearest tree. He backed the truck onto the road and Brandon and I got aboard.

He drove down to the cove and the first person we saw was Steve.

He was white from loss of blood and his mind was cloudy from the blow. It was hard for him to think things out, and when he spoke he had to form each word. "I—don't know what happened," he said. "I was driving down the road. The next thing I knew I was on my back and you two boys were working over me."

"They accuse me of slugging and robbing you," Brandon said. "Have you ever seen me before? Am I an enemy of yours?"

"The answer to both question is—no," Steve said.

"I'm warning you, again, Mister to turn me loose," Brandon said.

"Answer one question—right," Bill said slowly, "and I'll turn you loose." Brandon's eyes narrowed, then he realized Bill was giving him no choice in the matter. He had to bluff his own part through.

"Go ahead—shoot."

"I took money from you. How much?"

"I made a deal and was paid cash. Twenty-five hundred dollars," he said. "I paid some bills." He seemed to concentrate on mental addition. "There should be something between seventeen hundred left. I'd have to have my bills to know exactly."

He was a cool one, and knew about what a fish buyer would carry with him, considering prices and the amount of fish we'd bring in.

Little Bill was just as cool. "Steve how much money did you have on you today?"

"Twenty-two hundred," Steve answered.

He turned back to Brandon again. "Big bills or little bills?" he asked.

"I don't remember exactly," Brandon said. The crew from the *Ancutty* had gathered and he was uneasy. "There were some twenties, tens and fives. There might be some fifties, thought I might've passed them out when I paid my bills. A man doesn't expect a thing like this, so he don't remember little things."

"Damned right a man didn't expect a thing like this," Bill said. "Well, Steve, what was in your roll?"

"Tens and fives," Steve answered, "and twenty ones for change."

"I haven't counted this," Bill said, "nor looked at it."

He squatted down on the ground and counted out the money—twenty-two hundred in tens and fives, with a packet of twenty ones. "Here's your money, Steve."

"That's enough for me," an *Ancutty* fisherman roared. "I'm for putting this shark through the Skookum Chuck—with a rock tied to his feet."

"He won't come up again. There won't be anybody if they try us," another said. Angry, advancing, menacing, they loomed like giants in their hip boots and slickers.

Brandon cracked. "Don't let 'em touch me, Jenner," he said, "I'll make a deal. I'll talk. See? They don't hang men for assault and robbery. The buyer isn't dead.

Just hurt. Sure, I'm guilty. Now keep 'em back. Give me a gun and I'll help you."

One of them jeered, amused at the man's fear of dying in dark waters. They took that chance every day of their lives. "Drown you? Hell, Brandon, the water's too clean to be used for that. We just helped Little Bill complete his case against you. Well, Steve, let's do business. We've got a thousand dollars worth of fish aboard."

Little Bill and I watched the unloading. As it was finished and the *Ancutty* backed from the landing, the *Jack Byrne* came out of the mists. I could see Big Bill was relieved when he saw his son standing there, The tide had turned and the water was roaring northerly through the channel again.

"Hello, Captain," Little Bill shouted at his father. "Did you run the Skookum Chuck or go around the island?"

I had a hard time to keep from grinning. We all knew damned well the boat had gone around. "You can't run the Skookum Chuck," Big Bill said.

"That's right," Little Bill said, "you can't run the Skookum Chuck."

I grinned at Little Bill. He was getting old and conservative.

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SAMURAI

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●

And a very human yarn of the meek little man who paroled himself from the humdrum for one glorious hour—and became the "Cinderella" of the American underworld!

Mr. CINDERELLA by Lawrence Treat

EDWARD DALY JAY LUCAS R. V. GERY

FRANK GRUBER J. J. DES ORMEAUX

The Little Man Thought That as Black John Had Packed the Packsack, He'd Know Whether There Were Any Ethics in It or Not

THUNDER ON HALFADAY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of the Stories of Black John Smith and the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

"THAT'S a horse on you, an' you kin beat them three sixes in one, er else buy a drink," Black John Smith said, as he shoved the leather dice box across the bar toward old Cush, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little band of outlawed men that had collected on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border.

Cush gathered the dice and, with box poised in hand, glanced toward the open doorway where a man stood peering into the room. He was a wiry little man. His flannel shirt was open at the throat, and the legs of a well-worn pair of overalls were thrust into the tops of his laced pacs. A limp packsack dangled from his shoulders, and as he advanced toward the bar Black John noted that his soft brown eyes held a confiding look—like the eyes of a hound. Rolling the dice onto the bar, Cush glanced at them, returned them to the box, and set out a bottle and three glasses.

"What place is this?" the little man asked, as he paused beside Black John.

"Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Creek. That's Lyme Cushing himself behind the bar there, an' I'm John Smith—Black John, to be explicit, owin' to my whiskers bein' that color." He nodded toward the bottle. "Fill up. Cush is buyin' a drink."

"Well—I don't know." The little man hesitated, his eyes on the bottle. "It's kind of bad walking, and I am a little tired. I don't think one drink would hurt me any. Do you?"

"I wouldn't go so fer as to say the injury would be irreparable. Why not take a chanct? Steve Brody did."

"Oh, yes—the man who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge. Yes, it's just like I told Stella. 'Stella,' I said, when she was trying to talk me out of coming up here to the Klondike, 'a man will never get any place if he don't take a chance'."

"That's right," Black John agreed. "But yer quite a ways from the Klondike."

"Oh, back home we call everything up here 'the Klondike'."

"Sort of broad-minded, eh?"

"No. Just ignorant, I guess you'd call it. They don't do a very good job of teaching geography in the schools. Why, I got clear to Dawson before I found out the

Klondike wasn't in Alaska—and I went through high school, too. Joe Petty's my name. I'm from Minneapolis."

"Yeah? Well, drink up, Joe. This is Cush's busy day, an' yer interferin' with his routine."

The man filled his glass and glanced about the room. "Kind of a funny place for a saloon," he opined. "I shouldn't think there'd be much trade, way out here. I know a man that runs a saloon in Minneapolis and he's always kicking about not having trade enough. He's on a busy street, too."

"Oh, Cush gits trade enough. Here's lookin' at you."

The little man raised the glass to his lips and took a deep swallow. Tears stood in his eyes as he coughed, and retched, and choked, and gagged. "By Judas!" he exclaimed when he finally recovered his voice. "I didn't know whiskey was that strong. I never drank any before without there was something in it—like seltzer, or something."

"We like ourn neat," Black John grinned. "It's all right after you git used to it."

"I wouldn't want to get used to anything like that. Gosh, it's worse than pepper, the way it burns your throat."

"Fill up agin," invited Black John. "I'm buyin' this one. Mebbe you'll have better luck, next time. Most of that one went on the floor."

"No thanks," the little man said, and turned to Cush. "Have you got any sarsaparilla?"

"Any—which?" asked Cush, eyeing the bung starter.

Black John laughed. "No, there ain't much call fer pop of no flavor, here on Halfaday. The boys' tastes runs mostly to licker."

"Halfaday," the man repeated. "You've got funny names for places, up here—like Forty Mile, and Sixty Mile, and White Horse."

"I don't know's there any funnier'n some of them Minnesota names. How about Mennehaha, an' Shakopee, an' Sleppy Eye?"

"That's right," Petty agreed. "I guess no name sounds funny when you get used to it."

"Where you headin'?" Black John asked, eyeing the limp packsack.

"Oh, no place. That is, any place would do. I just kept on walking till I got here. It's like I always say—if you just keep on walking you'll get some place; if you go far enough. You're bound to."

"I think you've got somethin' there," Black John admitted, gravely. But where did you start from?"

"You mean—originally?"

"Well, I wouldn't go back no more'n two, three generations."

"From Minneapolis. I read meters for the gas company."

"Looks like you'd got a mite off yer beat."

"Oh, I quit my job and came to the Klondike to look for gold."

"Find any?"

"Yes, we dug up quite a lot of it on the edge of a lake."

"Who's 'we'?"

"My pardner and I. You see, it was all on account of the Sunday paper—that, and Uncle Josiah. I don't read the Sunday paper much—but Stella does. I've got a workbench down in the basement and I like to go down there Sundays and make things—sleds and kites for the kids, and stuff like that. I made 'em a little wagon, once. And I made Stella a dish cabinet, and when the lady next door seen it she wanted one too. So I made her one and her husband give me seven dollars for it.

"ONE Sunday Stella called me for dinner and I washed up and come upstairs and she had the Sunday paper all spread out where a lot of pictures was in it of steamboats, and mountains, and Indians, and men in canoes, and some more with packsacks on their back. And she

says how I ought to read the piece which told about the Klondike, and how anybody could go up there and stake out a claim and pan out gold. So I read it, and then I went back to the basement and varnished a couple of chairs for Stella, and didn't think no more about it till one morning along about the middle of the week.

"When I was starting out to read meters, that morning, the trouble wagon was just pulling out to fix a busted main, and I seen that a new man was bossing the crew. So I hollered at the driver and ask him if Jim Foley was sick. Jim, he'd bossed the trouble gang ever since I'd worked for the company. And the driver says Jim had quit his job and went off to the Klondike along with a couple of other fellows to hunt for gold.

"So, all the rest of the week while I was walking from house to house reading meters I'd be thinking about Jim Foley riding on one of them big steamboats, and seeing all them mountains, and paddling along in a canoe, and carrying a pack on his back, and talking to Indians, and digging out gold. The next Sunday there was another piece in the paper about it, and pictures of bears and moose, and some men shoveling gravel into a kind of trough like, and picking out the chunks of gold and putting them in sacks.

"So then I tells Stella about Jim Foley, and I says, 'By gosh, I'd like to go up there and dig up some of that gold, too!' And Stella she jest laughed and tells me to don't be a fool, and where would I ever get the money to go to Alaska? And what would I do when I got there? I says: 'I'd dig up gravel and shovel it in a trough or a pan and pick the gold out of it just like these other men was doing.' And she says, 'Don't be silly, Joe. You ain't got gumption enough to do anything like that—and besides you ain't big enough. You'd look pretty,' she says, 'climbing up one of them mountains with a pack on your back bigger than you are!' 'A small man can carry just as much as a big one,' I told her. 'He's got to make more trips, that's all. Look here, Stella,' I says, 'I might a dang sight better be walking up a mountain or along some crick, if I could find a lot of gold, than to keep on walking from one house to another reading gas meters. Meter reading ain't got no future in it.' 'No,' she says, 'but it's got sixty dollars a month in it.' 'Yes,' I says, 'but what's sixty dollars a month? Look at all the rich folks that's living in big houses and riding around in carriages. Look at Tom Lowery. I read his meter every month and his yard is dang near as big as Loring Park, and he's got so many hired girls and hired men that it would bust a common man jest to feed 'em all—let alone paying them wages. And I'll bet Queen Victoria ain't got a better house than Tom Lowery's. Why, even his barn has got screens on to keep out the flies, and running water in it too. How'd you like to live like that?' I says. 'Well, you ain't never going to on sixty dollars a month. And I don't mind telling you,' I says, 'that I'd just as soon live like Tom Lowery. I'm tired reading meters, anyhow,' I tells her, 'what with women kicking about their meter must be wrong because their bill was bigger than their neighbors and they didn't use nowheres near as much gas as their neighbor used, and getting all covered with coal dust, and skinning my shins on stuff they leave laying around in them dark basements, and getting bit by dogs, and having women bawl me out for tracking in mud, and claiming I kicked their cat when I only stepped on it in the dark.'

"Well, Stella's all right, far as she goes. 'Sure, Joe, I know,' she says, 'there's a lot better jobs than reading meters—but you haven't got 'em. I wouldn't want to live like Tom Lowery does. And neither would you. You just think you would. What I'd like most in the world,' she says, 'is a nice little place out in the country where we could have our own garden, and maybe a horse and buggy, and some chickens, and a lake nearby where the children could swim and go fishing, and roam around in

the woods. But we haven't got it, and there's no chance to get it—so I just don't think about it.' 'But if I was to go to the Klondike and dig up some gold we could have all them things, and more too,' I tells her. 'But it would cost a lot of money to get up there," she says. 'And what would the children and I do while you was gone? Who would pay the rent? And what would we eat, and wear?'

"Well, she had me there. And then, the very next day, the luckiest thing happened you ever seen—Uncle Josiah got hit by a train. Yes, sir—out by Osseo, it was. He was kind of deef and I guess he didn't hear the train whistle because he drove right onto the track and the limited came around the curve and killed him and his horse both, and smashed his buggy to kindling wood. I was the only relative he had, and named after him, to boot. So after a long rigamarole, the judge ordered the bank to pay me Uncle Josiah's money. After everything was paid up the bank give me six thousand, four hundred and twenty-two dollars and sixty-six cents.

"'And now,' Stella says, 'we can buy that little place in the country. It seems just like providence, or something,' she says, 'because the day after Uncle Josiah's funeral I seen an ad in the papers where a man wants to sell a ten acre lot with a house and barn on it on the edge of a lake right near Sauk Centre, for six thousand dollars. We'll buy it,' she says, 'and move up there.' 'Yes,' I says, 'and have four hundred and twenty-two dollars and sixty-six cents to live on the rest of our life. There ain't no gas meters to read in Sauk Centre,' I says, 'and ten acres is too big for a garden, and too little for a farm, and besides, I ain't no farmer, anyhow. I'm going to divide Uncle Josiah's money up between us, and you and the kids can stay right here and live off your half until I get back with the gold, because I'm taking my half and hitting for the Klondike.'

"Well, Stella tried to talk me out of it, and when she seen she couldn't, she got mad, and we had it back and forth. Take a woman that ain't never had very much and let her marry into money, that way, it kind of spoils 'em, I guess. Anyhow, I figured she'd have time to cool off before I got back, so I lays three thousand, two hundred and eleven dollars and thirty-three cents on the table and walks out on her. I figured on coming up here and digging out what gold I wanted and getting back by Christmas. But it don't look like it will work out that way, because here it is July already, and I haven't got no gold, and I havn't got no more money, either."

"An' not much else," said Black John, eyeing the limp packsack that still dangled from the man's shoulders.

"No, just a piece of canvas, and an extry shirt, and socks, and my spare pants. My pardner took everything else when he skipped out on me."

"Didn't you mention takin' out gold along the edge of some lake?"

"Oh, yes. We dug out quite a lot of it, but my pardner took it all when he went away—stole it, that's what he did. And not only that, he took the blankets and all the grub we had left, and our rifle—after I'd paid for it, back there in Dawson. I not only paid for everything we had, but I loaned him all the money I had left to keep his old mother while we were off on the prospecting trip."

"Where'd you run onto this pardner?" Black John asked. "Who is he?"

"His name is Bill Smith."

"Oh—jest another one of the Smith boys, eh?"

"Do you know him?"

"PROB'LY not—the family bein' more er less prolific in these parts. Where'd you meet up with him?"

"In Dawson. It was a couple of nights after I got there, and I was trying to find Jim Foley. You see, Jim came up here a couple of months before I did, and I knew he'd know all the best places to dig gold. I done him a favor once—so I knew he'd

tell me. But everybody I asked didn't know Jim. He was a hard worker, so I figured he'd be out on some crick digging up gold. I knew he wouldn't be very far from town because Jim's got his faults, and one of them is liking to get drunk on Saturday nights.

"I asked where the nearest crick was, but they told me so many I decided the quickest way to find Jim was to wait till Saturday night came and then look for him in the saloons. I went from one saloon to another, but I couldn't find him, nor any one that knew him, till I came to a place called the Klondike Palace. Gosh, at first, I didn't know what kind of a place I'd got into! There was good looking women in there all painted up and dressed something scandalous, standing up to the bar smoking cigarettes and drinking right along with the men. I was going to duck out before someone seen me in there and told Stella. But I happened to remember that another one of Jim's faults was going to houses of ill fame when he got to drinking. So I began asking about Jim, but no one in there seemed to know him, and I went to the bar and laid down a ten dollar bill and called for a glass of beer, not liking to ask the bartender about Jim without spending some money. And he gave me a small beer and only nine dollars and fifty cents in change, and I kicked about it because in Minneapolis you can get a big schooner of beer for five cents.

"This Bill Smith was standing there at the bar and he explained that beer was fifty cents, in Dawson, and they didn't give out no schooners, on account of the freight, and there not being no brewery in town. We got to talking and I told him about Jim and how I wanted to find him so I could get to work digging out gold. He asked me did I have any money to buy an outfit and I told him I had right around three thousand dollars. So then he told me about Jim and a couple of other fellows going on a prospecting trip to some river a couple of hundred miles away. But he said I didn't need to worry about not finding Jim if all I wanted was to dig gold He said he had a proposition about a hundred miles back off the river where he could shovel out all the gold we wanted. He said I was lucky to run onto him, because he was looking for a pardner to go back there with him who would furnish the outfit, because he was broke, right now. I ask him how he come to be broke if he had such a good proposition on this crick, and he laughed and said it was easy come, easy go with him. He said he'd been in Dawson a week and had got drunk and gambled away fifty thousand, but he didn't care because he could go back to this crick and take out fifty thousand more in a week's time.

"HE claimed he could get lots of pardners but he said most of 'em would prob'ly be crooks and try to beat him out of his claim. He said he could tell an honest man when he seen one—and I looked honest. I told him I'd like to get in on a deal like that because I wanted to get rich by Christmas. He figured that if we worked hard we could take out fifty thousand a week apiece, and in ten weeks we'd have a million to split between us. Or, if we wanted to stretch it to twenty weeks, we could both be a millionaire.

"That suited me all right. But I wasn't going to be played for a sucker, so I asked him if he had any references. 'The best in the world,' he says. 'Cuter Malone, the proprietor of this place, is one of the richest and most influential men in the whole Yukon. Just step back to his private office and he'll tell you if I'm on the level.' So we went back there and he introduced me to Mister Malone, who spoke very highly of Bill Smith, and assured me that I could rely on anything Bill told me. Mister Malone is an important looking man with a big diamond in his tie and another one in his ring, and he verified Bill's statement about gambling away the fifty thousand, but said he guessed that didn't bother

Bill very much because he had one of the best propositions in the country.

"So the next day we went to the A. C. Store and he picked out what we needed and I paid for it, and just as we were about to start, Bill said, 'Oh, gosh—my mother! The dear old lady has got to eat while I'm gone. Give me what cash you've got left and I'll slip it to her. It will keep her going till we get back even if we decide to stick out there for that million apiece. I'll pay you back and a hundred percent interest on top of it as soon as we get back to the claim.' So I gave him the money, and he was gone for a few minutes, and then he came back and we carried the stuff down to the river and loaded it in our canoe and started out.

"We paddled across the Yukon and up it for a couple of days and then up another river. We kept on going and every crick we'd pass we'd stop and pan out some gravel, but we didn't find anything that Bill said was pay dirt. I asked him why we stopped and fooled with other cricks when we already had a good thing, and he said that a man could never have too much, and if we could make another strike we could sell it for an extra million, or so. We kept on up this river, and one day we came to a falls and portaged around it and camped that night at the top of it. We hauled the canoe out and turned it over on a flat rock and in the night the wind came up and blew it into the river and it went over the falls and got all smashed to pieces on the rocks.

"We each cut a square of canvas out of the tent, and put that, and what grub we could carry, and a blanket apiece in our packsacks, and took the rifle and a shovel and a pan and started to walk. Bill said it was too far to walk back down this river, but we could cut across to the White River and get a canoe from an Indian and go back to Dawson for another outfit. He said it was too far to walk on to his claim with what grub we could carry.

"We found a little crick and followed it up and four or five days later we came to a lake. Bill admitted he was lost. He said he didn't know where the White River was from there, and maybe we better turn back. So we camped there and I got to fooling around with the shovel and pan, and, by gosh, the first pan I panned had a lot of gold in it! Yes, sir—the whole bottom of the pan was yellow with gold. Bill said it wasn't as rich as his other claim, but it wasn't so bad. So we stayed there a week and panned out about fifty pounds of gold—"

"Fifty pounds!" Black John exclaimed. "You mean fifty ounces, don't you?"

"No. Fifty pounds—maybe a few pounds more. I done most of the digging because Bill's shoulder hurt him. It was hard work and sometimes I'd get so tired I'd lay down there on the gravel and take a nap. And one day I woke up and found Bill gone. He'd taken all the grub, and the two blankets, and the rifle, and all the gold. He didn't leave me anything but the pan and the shovel. I was going to hit out and follow him back to that river. But then I got to thinking. You see, I knew Bill was kind of careless or clumsy like, because one day when I was walking ahead of him when he was carrying the rifle, it went off just as my foot tripped on a root and the bullet went right through the side of my shirt. If I hadn't tripped just then it would have gone plumb through me. Bill said he was awful sorry. He said he must have had the safety off and a twig caught in the trigger. After that I always walked behind him when he had the gun. Then another day while we were camped at the lake he did a clumsy thing. The rocks around the lake rise straight out of

the water and most places they're a couple of hundred feet high, but right next to where we panned out the gold there is a shoulder of rock only about twenty feet high. The top is nice and flat and that's where we camped.

"ONE evening I was sitting on the edge of the rock catching some fish for supper when Bill came along with some firewood, and he tripped and fell against me, and knocked me off into the lake. That water is so dang cold that I was numb all over and nearly got drownded before I could swim to the gravel and crawl out. Bill apologized for being so clumsy. He said if it had been him that fell off that rock he'd have drownded sure because he can't swim a lick. But after that I let him catch the fish for supper.

"Right up to the time Bill pulled out on me I thought he was just clumsy or careless. But as I was about to follow him I got to wondering if it was just carelessness? 'Maybe,' I says to myself, 'he tried to kill me.' I hate to think that of him, but by gosh, when he skips out and takes all the grub, and the gold, and blankets, and the rifle, it shows he's a mean man! How did he think I was going to get out of there?"

"He didn't," Black John said.

"Well, that's what I figured. And I figured if that's the way he felt, the less I had to do with him the better. So I didn't follow him because, him having the rifle, he might shoot me. I just took my packsack and the shovel and pan, and kept on going the way we were heading when we found that lake."

"How long ago was it you left this lake?"

"Oh, it must be a couple of weeks."

"How did you make it through? What did you eat?"

"I found some berries. And sometimes I'd kill a bird with a rock. Twice I killed a porcupine with a club. I caught some fish, and some frogs and ate them. I had my pan to cook the things in. But I threw my shovel away, because I knew I couldn't carry very much gold along, even if I found any."

"Could you go back to this lake?" Black John asked.

"I don't know about that. I guess I could, if I wanted to. It's pretty rough walking through those mountains. I wouldn't care to go back there."

"But, man, this strike you made—you shore as hell ain't goin' off an' leave it! Twelve thousan', eight hundred dollars right out of the top gravel in a week!"

"Yes, but that's only six thousand, four hundred apiece—or that's what it would have been if Bill hadn't stole it all. And we could take out fifty thousand a week on Bill's claim. I'm entitled to a half interest in that claim of Bill's. Mister Malone was a witness to our agreement. I'm going back to Dawson and hire some men to go up there with me and work my half of it."

"Listen, Joe," Black John said, "you're damn lucky to be alive! The worst bunch of tin horns an' cheap crooks in the Yukon hangs out around the Klondike Palace, an' this yegg that calls himself Bill Smith is evidently one of 'em. An' as fer Cuter Malone—he's the stinkin'est one of the lot! This Bill Smith never had no more claim than a rabbit. He played you fer a sucker—got you to finance a prospectin' trip—got all the rest of yer money on the pretense of needin' it fer his mother—an' then tried to knock you off."

"But if he hasn't got a claim he's guilty of fraud, or obtaining money under false pretenses, or something. He certainly isn't honest. I'm going straight to Dawson and have him arrested!"

"You'd never find him in Dawson. An' if you did you couldn't prove nothin' on him. It would be his word agin yours—an' Cuter Malone would back him up."

"Well, maybe you're right—if that's the kind of a man Mister Malone is," the little man admitted ruefully. "I guess the only thing for me to do is go back to Dawson and hunt up Jim Foley. The way things

turned out, I'll bet Bill lied about Jim going off on that prospecting trip. I'll bet he never knew Jim, at all. Jim will know the best place to dig gold. He's smart, or he'd never got to be boss of the trouble gang. Anyway, I prefer some place right near Dawson. You see, I want to take out quite a lot of gold, and if I dug it down there I wouldn't have so far to carry it to the steamboat. It would save a lot of time and hard work—and I want to get home by Christmas. Stella will be cooled down by then. And I'll buy her and the kids some nice presents."

BLACK JOHN heaved a deep drawn sigh, filled his glass, and emptied it at a gulp. "Joe," he said, "there's quite a lot about this country you don't savvy. In the first place, this Jim Foley is prob'ly a damn good repair boss fer a gas works. He also seems to possess the redeemin' qualities of gittin' drunk Saturday nights, an' frequentin' places of questionable repute. But that don't make him a good prospector. Despite the fact that he's be'n in the country a couple of months, he's jest another damn chechako. He wouldn't know no more about where to make a strike than you do. Besides which, all the good cricks along the Yukon are staked from one end to the other. Most of 'em was staked before the chechakos come flockin' in on us. An' there ain't more'n half a dozen of them claims out of every hundred that's payin' better'n wages—an' wages is sixteen dollars a day. An' here you talk about walkin' off an' leavin' a proposition that pans out better'n two thousan' dollars a day, figgerin' a six day week. An' that right out of the top gravel! How big is this here gravel area you was pannin'?"

"That's the trouble with it, it ain't very big—maybe two or three acres."

"Acres! Cripes, I'd fergot there was sech things as acres! I mean how big is it—how many feet one way, an' the other?"

"Oh, I'd say it's a patch about sixty rod each way, with the crick runnin' right through the middle of it. It's all surrounded by high rocks, and after the crick leaves this gravel bar, it runs over hard rock. You couldn't dig anywheres along the crick—only right there where the gravel is."

"Hum—sixty rod—jest about one good discovery claim. Didn't you sock in no stakes there?"

"Stakes?"

"Shore—to mark the claim. Stakes with the date, an' yer name on 'em."

"No, we didn't do anything like that. But I don't understand. You say most of the claims don't pay better than wages? How about all those men the paper told about that are getting rich digging out gold?"

"The papers prob'ly lied. Most of 'em do. But anyone outside of dredge propositions that's got rich takin' out dust, done so before the chechakos come crowdin' in."

"But why would anyone come clear up here just to make wages? They could stay home and get wages. I could have done that. I could have kept right on reading meters."

"The rest of 'em prob'ly believed the papers, same as you did. Most of 'em know the truth by now. The rest of 'em'll damn soon find it out. But you're lucky. That is, if you kin find yer way back to that lake, you are. Why man—you've got one of the biggest propositions in the country. An' you'd walk off an' leave it!"

"Do you really think so? Well, well, won't Stella be surprised? She said I didn't have any gumption. But I knew I could find gold, if I could get up here. It was lucky Uncle Josiah got hit by that train. Why, just think, only a couple of minutes, one way or the other, and he wouldn't have been on the track—and I'd still be reading meters!"

"Yer luck's too damn good to be true," Black John said dryly. "I'd even bet you kin find yer way back to that lake."

The little man nodded. "Yes, I guess I can. It's quite a ways, though, and the

walking's bad. But if you think it's the best thing to do, I'll go back there. I'm kind of tired, but I guess I'd better be starting. I don't want to waste any time, and I'll prob'ly have a hard time finding my shovel. You see, I carried it a couple of days before I threw it away, and I haven't got any money to buy a new one, or a blanket, either." He turned from the bar, and was halfway to the door when Black John stopped him.

"Hey—hold on! You don't mean yer hittin' out to find that lake right now—jest as you are?"

"Why, sure. There's no use wasting time."

"But—what are you goin' to eat?"

"Oh, fish, and frogs, and porcupines, and birds, and berries—the same as I did before."

"Well—I'll be damned! I don't know what this here gumption is that yer wife claims you ain't got. But if it's guts she means, you kin tell her fer me that she's out of her head! What do you figger on doin' when you git to the location—if you do git there?"

"Why—dig out a lot of gold, if I can find my shovel. I've still got my pan."

"Yeah—an' what'll you do when Bill Smith comes back?"

"Oh, I don't think he'll go back there. He didn't like to dig much on account of he claimed his shoulder hurt him. I guess that's why he pulled out."

"Look here, Joe—don't be a damn sucker all yer life. What he pulled out fer is to git back to Dawson as quick as God will let him an' record that location. An' he'll record it in his own name—figgerin' that you're bushed. An' there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do about it."

"Well, then—what's the use of me going back there?"

"Yer goin' back, all right—an' I'm goin' with you. An' by God, we're takin' blankets, an' plenty of grub along. Damned if I'm goin' to sleep cold, an' eat frogs!"

"Oh, will you go back with me? That will be fine. We'll go in pardnership. But—what if Bill Smith does come back?"

"That'll be his hard luck," Black John said. "An' it ain't that I'm tryin' to horn in is on that location, neither. Fact is I've kinda took a likin' to you, Joe. I'd hate to see you git holt of the wrong end of the stick."

II

THAT evening at Black John's table the little man ate ravenously. "It's nice to have salt on your meat," he said, "and some tea to drink. And," he added, with a glance toward the extra bunk, "it's sure going to be nice to sleep in a bunk with blankets over you. A little square of canvas don't keep the cold out nights, and if it rains and you have it over you the water runs under it and gets you wet anyhow."

"Yeah, you shore must of had a miserable trip gittin' here from that lake. Could you draw a sort of rough map to show which way you come?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't draw a map. You see, the country was all about the same. I had to climb over mountains, and go around 'em, and follow up some cricks, and down some other ones. But if I had some boards I could make you a nice dish cabinet to put there on the wall."

"To hell with a dish cabinet! What we got to do is figger how to git back to this lake. Don't you know what direction it would be from here?"

"Well, Bill Smith figured that the White River would be south of where we were. But then Bill admitted he was lost when we found the lake. You see, I kept on coming the way we were headed when we found it, and it must have been kind of southish, because the sun would be on my left hand in the mornings and my right hand in the evenings, except sometimes it would be the other way—and on cloudy days I didn't know where it was."

"Didn't you have no compass?"

"Yes, but it wasn't any good, so I threw

it away. It's just like the man at the store told me—it kept pointing north, and I didn't want to go that way."

"That's so," grinned the big man. "I never thought of that. But if you headed south, the lake must be somewheres north of here. We've got that much to go on—I hope. An' you say you went up some cricks an' down others. That shows you must of crossed anyways one divide. You was in at least two different watersheds."

"Watersheds? No, I wasn't in any building at all. I didn't even see any buildings. You mean what we call water closets, I guess."

"That's a damn pore guess—even fer a chechako," grinned Black John. "I've got a feelin' that if we find this lake, it's goin' to be by the grace of God, er because yer luck holds out, rather than anything we kin do about it. You better roll in an' git a good night's sleep, an' I'll slip over an' throw our trail outfit together."

Old Cush eyed Black John somberly as the big man stowed the supplies into two packsacks. "I've know'd you to do a lot of fool things, John, take it first an' last—but never nothin' so foolish as hittin' out to foller a two-weeks' back trail of some damn chechako which he didn't know where he was goin' when he started; nor where he's be'n when he got here. They hadn't ort to let fellas like him into the country. Cripes—he'd be lost if he got two streets off'n his gas meter route!"

"It's his luck I'm bankin' on—not his woodcraft," grinned the big man. "Why, he even throw'd away his compass because it p'inted north when he wanted to go south. But—remember Uncle Josiah an' that train of cars!"

"Yeah—but from this here Josier's angle, it was damn pore luck."

"Shore. But me an' Joe ain't tacklin' this proposition from Uncle Josiah's angle. Therefore the luck's clearly on our side. Not only that, but apparently it's a phenominal streak of luck. What with a damn crook like this so-called Bill Smith takin' shots at Joe's back, an' shovin' him off rock ledges, an' skippin' out an' leavin' him to git bushed, Joe ain't got no right to be alive—an' he wouldn't be, if his luck wasn't runnin'."

"Every streak of luck's got to break sometime," Cush warned lugubriously. "You'll be in a hell of a fix if you got way out in the mountains somewheres an' yer grub runs out."

"Oh, I don't know. If Joe Petty could make it through without even a rifle to git meat with, an' no blanket, I guess we'll manage to get through all right."

"Yeah—but he et frogs."

"Well—what of it? Go back to the Good Book. John the Baptist went him one better—he et locusts an' wild honey."

"Yeah—but you ain't no John the Baptist, by a damn sight. You ain't even a 'Piscopalian! An' what's more, they ain't no locusses in them mountains."

"Ignorin' the theological angle, I'm still bankin' on Joe's luck holdin' till we find that lake."

"Huh—they ain't but damn few lakes in the country. How do you know he ain't lyin'? I wouldn't believe no chechako which one drink of licker would gag him. An' which he ain't got no more sense that to holler fer sass-prilly pop, on Halfaday!"

"He wasn't lyin'," Black John replied with conviction. "That lake's in there, somewheres. I'd bet on that. The thing is to find it."

"'You claim he wasn't lyin'—how about him tellin' about takin' out better'n fifty pound of dust in a week's time, workin' only one shovel an' pan? I s'pose that ain't lyin'?"

"I don't think so. They done better than that on some of them early claims on Bonanza."

"Yeah, but it was sourdoughs done it—not some damn chechako which would throw away a compass 'cause it p'inted north!"

"A chechako could take out jest as much

dust as a sourdough, onct he's blundered onto a rich pay streak."

"Yeah—but whoever heard of makin' a strike on a lake? Strikes is made on cricks—not lakes."

"Gold's where you find it," Black John reminded him. "A hell of a lot of sourdoughs passed up that moose pasture on Bonanza where Carmack made his big strike. An' Carmack might as well have be'n a chechako, as fer as makin' a strike goes. He was a moose hunter; not a prospector."

"Huh—s'pose there is a lake, an' s'pose you could find it, an' s'pose there is a rich proposition on it—what's it gittin' you? You claimed you didn't want to horn in on it."

"No—an' I don't. It's jest like I said—I've kind of took a likin' to Joe. He's sech an honest, earnest little man. He's the most trustful human I ever seen. He ain't got no right in the world to be alive, after what he's be'n through. An' the hell of it is, he don't even realize it. Then, there's Stella, an' them children, an' that little place out in the country with the horse an' buggy, an' the chickens an' all. Mebbe I'm thinkin' about them." Black John paused and his voice became suddenly hard. "But mostly I'm thinkin' about that coot that calls himself Bill Smith. I want to find that lake before he gits back to it. There's too damn many fellas like him besmirchin' the name of Smith in this country, as it is."

"Well—takin' it first an' last, John—you ain't sech a hell of a credit to the name, at that. Trouble is with you, a man can't figger you out. Let some pore woman, er some damn fool like this here Joe come along, an' anyone would think you was the softest hearted man in the country, the way you help 'em out. An' then agin, let some damn crook come along, you git so tough with 'em you take everything they've got an' mebbe hang 'em, to boot. An' all the time, by God, yer the biggest crook of 'em all!"

"Why—you damn old badger! Callin' me a crook right to my face. Ask Corporal Downey—he'll tell you if I'm a crook, er not."

"Yeah—an' Downey would tell it with his tongue stuck so fer in his cheek it would look like he had the mumps. You ain't foolin' Downey, none. It's jest that yer smart enough to not git nothin' on you this side the line."

"My old pal," grinned the big man. "I never thought I'd live to see the day you'd go back on me, Cush."

"I ain't gone back on you. I ain't told you a damn thing you don't know. I jest claimed no one could figger you out. Cripes, John—Halfaday would be a hell of a place if you wasn't here! I jest wisht I was as smart as you be—that's all."

III

FOR three days Black John and Joe Petty traversed the foot-hills heading for a huge snow-capped mountain around the base of which Petty insisted he had come. On the morning of the fourth day, with the peak behind them, the two stood at the fork of a creek that wound its way between high mountains.

"Now listen, Joe," the big man said, "you came down this crick, didn't you?"

"Sure I did."

"Well then, you must of come down one of these two forks. Try an' think which one it was. It'll make a hell of a lot of difference because they flare wide apart."

"That's right. But I don't remember any fork. You see, there was a lot of forks on a lot of cricks. I wouldn't of known I come down this crick at all if we hadn't found my tracks in the mud back there where I caught them frogs."

"Yeah, but we ain't goin' to find no more tracks. From here on up these cricks run over solid rock."

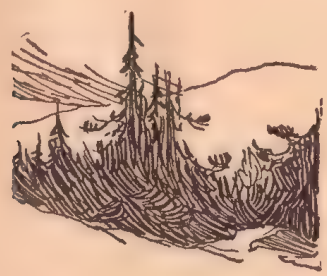
"I guess that's right. Well then, the only way to find the right crick is to do like we used to when we was kids and would lose a ball in the weeds. We'd spit in our

hand an' say, 'Spit, find that ball!' Then we'd hit the spit with our finger and whichever way it splattered the most, we'd hunt —an' we'd find the ball dang near every time." Gravely the little man spat into his left palm and brought a finger of his right hand down sharply upon it with the result that most of the spittle flew toward the left. Without hesitation he pointed to the left hand creek. "That's the one I came down," he announced. "Spit don't lie."

"My God!" breathed Black John, eyeing the little man in awe. "There seems to be more to gittin' around through this country than I ever knew. Come on—but if that luck of yourn ever breaks, we're goin' to be in a hell of a fix—jest like Cush said."

"Listen, Joe," Black John said, "you ain't got to worry about how many million you'll quit on till we find that lake. Look up there about a quarter of a mile ahead—see where them two big slabs of rock has broke loose an' toppled together formin' a sort of arch over the crickbed. Did you come down through that arch; er didn't you?"

"Why, sure I did! That's the only way I could have got down the crick. You can see for yourself that no one could get around it."



"But don't you remember comin' down through there? Hell, no one could pass a formation like that an' not notice it!"

"No, I don't remember it. You see, there's a lot of rocks, and they're all different. A man couldn't remember 'em all."

"You never come down this fork," the big man exclaimed testily. "Even you would remember that landmark!"

"Spit said I came this way—and spit don't lie," insisted the little man stoutly.

They went on, and well toward evening his faith was justified. As they came upon the charred remnants of a fire he reached down and picked up a discarded sock. "Look," he said, "here's the sock I throw'd away because the heel wore out and hurt my foot. I've got the mate to it in my pack."

BLACK JOHN heaved a long sigh of relief, and the following day they topped a divide from the summit of which they gazed out over a wooded basin of vast extent beyond which lay a range of mountains.

"Now look this over careful," Black John said. "You must of crossed this divide right where we're at, er you couldn't of come down that crick. Is yer lake in this basin; er did you cross a divide on the other side of it?"

"Oh, yes, the lake is in the mountains—there's mountains all around it. I guess I must have come across this valley, because I remember of going on and on through the woods for about a week, I guess. That was the week it was cloudy most of the time, and even when it wasn't I couldn't hardly ever see the sun for the trees."

"An' you didn't have yer compass then?"

"No, I'd throw'd it away. But I wish we had it now. It would come handy, seeing that we're trying to go north. But the last time I was here I wanted to go south."

"Oh, shore—I'd fergot that. But the sun—them few times you could see it—was it always on yer left in the forenoons, an' yer right in the evenin'?"

"No—that's the funny thing about it—sometimes it would be just the opposite. That's why I ain't so sure it's safe to go by the sun. It might fool you."

"Didn't you never hear of the north star?"

"Oh, sure. But there's lots of other stars, and I don't know which one it is. And be-

sides—it wouldn't have done me any good, that trip, because I wanted to go south."

"Oh, yeah. I keep fergittin'," the big man grinned. "Lookin' from here at them mountains I'd say that there was two passes that would let a man out of this valley—that notch you kin see way over there to the left—an' the deep one off to the right. You must of come down through one of them passes. Stop an' think—don't you remember which one it was?"

"No," replied the little man cheerfully, "I'm sure I don't remember. But it won't take us long to find out!" He paused, spat into his hand and repeated the performance by which he had selected the left hand fork of the creek. This time the spittle flew to the right and he pointed unhesitatingly to the right hand notch. "That's the one I came through," he announced, with conviction. "It's like I told you—spit don't lie. Come on, let's go. We can't waste much time if I'm goin' to get home by Christmas."

Midway of the valley they came to a considerable stream. "You don't, perchanct, rec'lect crossin' this river, I s'pose?" Black John asked.

"Well, I don't know. I crossed some river, and this might be the one. I crossed it quite a few times. Or maybe there was quite a bunch of rivers."

"Most likely only the one," Black John observed. "The fact is, you was lost in here fer a week. It looks to me like we're goin' to save about five, six days time crossin' this valley. That is," he added, "if yer spit picked out the right notch. If not, we'll be some thirty, forty miles off our course."

"Oh, sure I was lost. I was lost all the time. Even when Bill and I were at that lake we were lost."

"Jest spit yer way clean through to Cush's, eh?"

The other laughed. "Oh, no—I couldn't do that! You see, I didn't know there was any such place as Cush's. Spit can't tell you which way to go, if you don't know where you're going."

"Oh," replied Black John gravely, "there seems to be certain technicalities in connection with the spit method of orientation that I ain't be'n able to grasp yet. But I'll bet I'll know more about it by the time I git back! Come on—let's pull our pants off an' git acrost this river."

Late the following afternoon they came to the mountain range that bounded the valley on the north, and began the ascent of a deep gulch that led upward to the divide. The going was extremely rough. Huge rock fragments blocked the narrow canyon, necessitating much climbing. And brush grew thick along the banks of the tiny stream that trickled among the rocks. They camped that night on a tiny flat, and pushed on at daylight the following morning. At mid-day Black John swung the pack from his back, built a small fire, and hung the tea pail to boil.

"I don't believe you ever come down through this gulch," he said, "er you'd shore as hell remember it. It must of be'n the other one."

"No. This is the one, all right," the little man insisted stubbornly. "Spit don't lie. And I had so much rough walking that I couldn't have remembered this place, even if I'd never been here before."

"Oh," Black John said, "well, in that case, s'pose you rustle a little more dry wood while I slice up this pork."

The little man stepped into the spruce thicket to return a moment later smiling. "See," he said, tossing an object to the ground beside the fire, "I knew I was right. Here's my shovel that I threw away."

"Well I'll be damned!" exclaimed Black John. "That goes to show, Joe, that a man never ort to lose confidence in his guide. An' didn't you say that you only carried the shovel a couple of days before you throw'd it away? In that case, this lake can't be no hell of a ways from here."

"No. We can see it when we get to the top. It took me about a day and a half to climb up there, and when I got to the top

I looked back and there was the little lake shining like a looking glass. Why it looked almost like I could jump to it—and here it had took me a day and a half to get up there!"

That evening they topped the divide and, sure enough, there lay the little lake shimmering in the last rays of the setting sun.

"Yer luck shore held, Joe," Black John said, his eyes on the sparkling water. "We'd ort to make it by noon tomorrow. But tellin' you the truth, when we started out I figgered our chances of ever findin' this lake was damn slim."

"Oh, I knew we'd find it," smiled the little man. "It had to be right where I left it. It was just a question of coming back here—that's all."

"Yeah, I think you've got somethin' there. I guess you could go anywheres, Joe—if yer spit held out."

"Oh, sure—so could you, if you just remember how to do it!"

"I ain't so shore," grinned the big man. "There ain't no railroads in this country. An' even if there was, I ain't got no Uncle Josiah to start a streak of luck with. But don't never go explorin' no desert, Joe—you'd never in God's world git back!"

IV

THE gravel bar that the little creek traversed at the outlet of the lake showed that during the week the two men had spent there they had scarcely scratched the surface, and that in only two or three spots. Black John filled and washed pan after pan, staring down wide eyed at the gold that lay, butter yellow, in the bottom of each pan. He scowled at the two stakes set, one at either end of the bar. He read the inscription: "Wilhelm Schmidt. June 20, 1901." The stakes conformed with regulation, and were duly designated as Numbers 1, and 2.

"Who in thunder's Wilhelm Schmidt?" Joe Petty asked, squinting to read the words. "Gosh, someone must have come here after I left!"

"He's ondoubtless yer pardner, Bill Smith."

"But we didn't put up these posts. And he left here before I did."

"Yeah—but he know'd you couldn't stay here without no grub. So he hung around till he seen you go. Then he socked in his stakes."

"Oh, then maybe he just went down to Dawson to record the claim. Maybe I misjudged him, after all."

"Yeah? Well you notice, I s'pose, that your name don't show on the stakes—jest his?"

"That's so. Then he did steal the claim!"

"Well, he's took a preliminary step."

"But half of it's mine—even if he didn't put my name on the posts. So we'll just go ahead and dig out what gold we want."

Black John grinned. "We can't do that," he explained. "In the first place we ain't got enough grub along to do no extensive diggin' on. An' in the second place we've got to take certain steps to establish yer rights to this property."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we'll sock in yer stakes right beside his, puttin' yer name an' the date on 'em. Then we'll hit fer Dawson to find out if this here Schmidt has recorded the claim."

"But if he has," Joe objected, "I wouldn't have any rights here at all, would I? Because his posts are dated first."

"Well—that's the way it generally works out. Sometimes, though, there's exceptions."

"I think the best thing to do is just to pull his posts out and throw them away. Then mine would be the only ones here."

"Cripes, Joe," the big man exclaimed, "that would be an illegal act! I'm shore you wouldn't want to do nothin' illegal, no more'n I would. It would savor of dishonesty. Ain't you got no ethics?"

"I don't think so," replied the little man doubtfully. "You put the stuff in the pack-

sacks, back there at Cush's. I ain't be'n to the bottom of mine yet. What do they look like? I'll go and see."

"Don't bother," Black John replied. "A man wouldn't hardly need 'em in a case of this kind. I most likely fergot to fetch 'em along."

"But if he's recorded this claim for himself, I'm just out of luck, eh?"

"I wouldn't go so fer as to say that—considerin' Uncle Josiah, an' what's transpired sence his demise. No, I'd say yer luck's still runnin'. I kin tell better when we git to Dawson. Come on, we'll git them stakes planted, an' pull out. You said that this crick runs into that river you come up from the Yukon on, didn't you? Er have you got to spit to locate the Yukon from here?"

"Yes, we followed this crick right up from that river. We were hitting for the White River when we found this lake. But we haven't got any canoe, and it's a long ways to Dawson."

"Hell—we've got an ax! We'll build a raft an' float down."

"Why sure! It's funny Bill didn't think of that when we lost our canoe. He said we'd have to hit over to the White River and find some Indians."

"He never intended fer you to git back to Dawson."

"But what if he is coming back here, and we should meet him on the river? He might try to kill me, so I couldn't tell the police what happened."

"Ondoubtless the effort would fall short of success," Black John said. "If we do meet him, you better let me do most of the talkin'."

THREE days down the river they sighted two canoes drawn up on the bank where their occupants had evidently stopped to prepare a mid-day meal. Working the raft toward the spot, they landed, and Joe Petty stepped ashore to greet a large man who sat beside a fire with three Indians.

"Hello, Bill! Why did you pull out and take all the gold and the grub? And why didn't you put my name on those posts, too?"

"How the hell did you git here?" snarled the man.

"He come acrost to Cushin's Fort on Halfaday Crick," Black John answered.

"How the hell could he git there without no grub an' no blankets?" the man demanded.

"Et slim, an' slep' cold."

"Well—seein' he got there, what good did it do him?"

"That's what we want to find out. He claims he was a pardner of yourn."

"He's a damn liar! How's he goin' to prove it?"

"I'll prove it by Mister Malone!" the little man piped. "He was a witness to our agreement—right there in his office."

"Haw, haw, haw! Say, that's a good one! Go ahead an' prove it by Cuter."

"Joe, here, claims that not only he paid fer the outfit you fellas had, but he loaned you all the rest of his cash to keep yer old mother whilst you was gone. He says you offered him a half interest in a rich proposition, somewheres upriver."

"He's a damn liar. Hell, I don't even know if my mother's livin' yet! An' I never had no rich proposition up no river at that time. But I've got one now all right! Nothin' like it sence Bonanza! An' only the one discovery claim on the crick."

"If it's as good as you say," Black John answered mildly, "it looks like there'd be plenty in it fer the two of you. You look to me like a man that would want to do the right thing. I believe Joe here when he says you an' him was pardners. Why not deed him over half the claim?"

"What the hell do you take me fer? A damn fool? That location's all recorded in my name—an' him nor no one else gits a damn cent of it—only me! What if he was my pardner? How's he goin' to prove it? Cuter Malone'll claim he never seen him before. I 'tended to that."

"But this man's got a wife an' some kids

back there in Minneapolis. They're pore folks—never had nothin' much. Think of them—back there, waitin' fer him to come back, hopin' he'll fetch some gold so they kin take things a little easier. Joe, he thinks a heap of his wife an' them kids."

"Why the hell didn't he stay home with 'em, then? Saps like him hadn't ort to be turned loose, nohow. The fool would believe anything a man would tell him."

"Yeah—trouble with fellas like him, they think everyone else is honest as they are. That's why the cheap crooks kin take advantage of him."

"Hey, who the hell you callin' a cheap crook?" The man leaped to his feet, then stood peering sharply into the other's face. "S-a-a-y—ain't you Black John Smith?"

"So called."

"Say, I know'd it—soon's I got a good look at you. The smoke kep' you half hid, me, settin' back of the fire there. So that's the way of it, eh? He gits through to Halfaday an' tells you about this proposition, an' you come back with him, figgerin' to horn in on it. Well, yer out of luck, this time. I don't give a damn how smart folks claim you be. I've got that location all staked out proper, an' recorded—an' there ain't no way you kin horn in on it. Not you, nor that fool Joe, nor the police, nor not even the commissioner hisself! You're a fine guy to go callin' other folks crooks. You better go back to Halfaday amongst them other outlaws."

"Well—mebbe yer right," Black John admitted mildly. "I guess we might's well be shovin' along, if that's the way you feel about it. I jest figgered that mebbe you'd like to do the right thing when you know'd all the facts. But it seems I was wrong."

"Listen, Bud," the man snarled, emboldened by Black John's attitude, "the right thing fer me, is to git holt of every damn thing I kin—an' then hang onto it. Savvy?"

"Yeah—I grasp yer p'int. Gittin' holt of a thing's fairly easy, sometimes. Hangin' onto it's the hard part. So long."

"Didn't I tell you he's a mean man?" Joe said when they were once more on the river. "It looks like if Mister Malone would tell a lie; I haven't got a chance."

"Cuter Malone'll lie all right," Black John said. "But that part don't make no difference. His word ain't worth a damn, nohow."

"I haven't got any money at all now," Joe said. "I'll have to get a job when we hit Dawson. I don't suppose there'll be any meters to read. But I'm kind of handy at carpentering, and I noticed there's quite a lot of buildings going up."

"That's right," the big man replied. "I expect you better hook up with a job of some kind. I've got a little dust on me. I'll pay yer bill fer a week at the hotel. That'll give you a chanct to look around."

"Oh, thank you! I tell you, you're a fine man, Mister Smith. I was sure lucky to run onto a man like you—after the experience I had with Bill. Are you going back to Halfaday Crick? Where will I send the money to?"

"What money?"

"Why, the money to pay you back for my board bill at the hotel. I'll send it to you as soon as I get a job."

"Oh, yeah. Well, jest let that ride fer the present. Fact is, I might hang around the big river fer a spell. I've got a little business over on the Alaska side. Might drop down an' 'tend to it. I'll be seein' you on my way back."

V

ONE evening, a week later Black John stepped into the office of the hotel to find Joe Petty seated at a table laboriously penning a letter.

"I'm writing to Stella," he explained. "I got a job day before yesterday, working on that new warehouse the A. C. Company's putting up. Sixteen dollars a day. She'll be glad to hear that. I didn't write to her before because there wasn't nothing but bad news to write about."

"If all you've got to write about is this here job you better tear it up," Black John grinned. "Because me an' you are hitting out fer that lake in the mornin'."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that. Why, I haven't even made enough to pay you back for my board bill yet. And besides, it wouldn't do any good to go back there. You see, I went to Mister Malone and asked him if he didn't remember the pardnership agreement I had with Bill Smith, and he told me to get to hell out of there, that he'd never seen me before. So I went to the police and told them all about it, and a nice policeman named Corporal Downey went down to the recorder's with me. He looked up the records and found that this Wilhelm Schmidt had recorded the claim and had been issued a grant for it. Corporal Downey said he was sorry—but there isn't anything I can do about it. He said it was too bad that a damn crook could get away with a thing like that. But as long as I had no proof, I was out of luck."

"Out of luck, eh? Ondoubtless you fergot to tell Downey about Uncle Josiah."

"No, I didn't say nothing about him. I just told Corporal Downey about what happened after I got here. But I did tell him that miserable Bill Smith called you an outlaw, right to your face."

The grin behind the black beard widened. "An' what did Downey say about that?"

"Well, you see, I hadn't told him what your name was before that. I just didn't bother to tell him about going clear over to Halfaday Crick. I just said I'd run onto a man that went back to that lake with me and found those posts in on the claim. Well, when he found out who it was I'd run onto, he said that if you were my friend maybe my case wasn't quite as hopeless as it looked. He said you've got ways of getting at things that the police haven't got. But I told him that Bill was an awful tough talking man, and that we came away from there because you seemed kind of scairt of him. And when I said that Corporal Downey kind of choked like he'd swallowed part of his cigar. 'Even so,' he said, when he could talk again, 'if I was you, I'd sort of trail along with Black John.' "

"All right. That's jest what I'm askin' you to do. So now you've got Downey's word fer it, are you willin' to start back up there with me in the mornin'?"

"Why—sure—if you think it will do any good. But Mister Malone acting like he did, and the recorder claiming the location was recorded in Schmidt's name, and the police not being able to do anything, I'm afraid we'll just be wasting our time. And I'll prob'ly lose my job, to boot."

"I'll promise to git you another job, if you want one. Better roll in now, an' git a good night's sleep. We'll be pullin' out early in the mornin'.

VI

IT WAS early one evening nearly a week later when Black John and Joe Petty walked across the gravel bar at the outlet of the little lake and climbed the steep slope that led to the flat-topped rock-shoulder. Schmidt and his Indians were at supper.

"What the hell you doin' back here?" the man demanded truculently, reaching swiftly for the rifle that rested against a rock at arm's reach.

"Better jest leave it there," Black John

suggested smoothly. And the man's face paled slightly as he stared into the muzzle of the .45 that had suddenly appeared in the big man's hand.

"What the hell's this," he growled. "A hold-up?"

"No. Me an' Joe wouldn't stoop to nothin' like that. Fact is, we come here to sort of give you one more chanct to do the right thing by Joe. You know damn well what's right, an' what's wrong in this matter. You know Joe's entitled to a half interest in this location. I'm appealin' to yer better nature. Will you deed his half-interest over to him?"

"Not by a damn sight—yer crazy!" The man rose to his feet and stood glaring at Black John as the big man slipped the revolver into the front of his shirt.

"But—how about his wife an' kids?"

"To hell with his wife an' kids! He's the one that's got to think of them—not me. They could starve, fer all I give a damn—an' him along with 'em."

"All right. Have it yer own way. You've spoke yer piece—an' we've listened. But there's one thing I'd like to call yer attention to. Someone has removed Joe's stakes. We set 'em up right beside yourn. You got any idea who done it?"

"I did. An' what's more, I had a right to. Them stakes was set in after mine. The claim was already staked when you come along here."

"That's so. But I've jest be'n down an' recorded this location in Joe's name. An' he's s'posed to have his legal stakes in place."

"There ain't no legal stakes on this claim except mine. How the hell could you record this claim? It was recorded already. I paid my money, an' I've got my grant—an' I've got the papers to prove it. Reaching itno his pocket he withdrew a paper which he held out for Black John's inspection. Read the date on that grant. It's a good two weeks ahead of the date on them stakes you put in."

"Damn if it ain't," Black John agreed, scrutinizing the paper the man held tightly in his hand. "But there's more to a grant than jest the date on it."

"What do you mean—more?"

"Well—I notice that this here grant of yourn was issued in Dawson fer one thing."

"Where the hell would it be issued? That's where the recorder's at, ain't it?"

"Fer the Yukon—yes. But there's one thing you overlooked. Er mebbe you jest ignored it. A slight technicality, you might call it. But it seems to have a bearin' on this case."

"What's that? What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Merely callin' yer attention to the fact that this here location lays in Alaska—not in the Yukon. It's a matter of eight miles west of the boundary."

"You lie!" The man's face flushed suddenly, and his voice rose to a shrill falsetto.

"No I don't. The line's marked with monuments at reg'lar intervals. You either didn't notice 'em, er you didn't heed 'em. I don't know which. An' it don't make no difference. I dropped down-river an' recorded this claim at Eagle—"

With a choking sound like the snarl of a wild beast, the man launched himself straight at Black John who stood scarce six feet away, and close to the edge of the rockwall. The big man side-stepped swiftly as the other shot past—straight out over the edge of the rock. A shrill shriek of terror was followed by a loud splash as the man's body struck the water.

Joe Petty ran helplessly up and down the edge of the rock, his eyes wide with horror, as the man reappeared and wildly thrashed the surface with his arms. "Oh—do something," he cried. "Get a rope, quick! He can't swim a lick. He told me so, himself."

"There ain't no rope handy," Black John replied. "An' we wouldn't need one, even if there was. It looks like the lake's goin' to cheat us out of a hangin'."

"Oh—I can't see him any more. He's sunk," cried Petty, wringing his hands.

"That's good. Ondoubtless the weight

of his sins drug him down," the big man said, and turned to the Indians. "You fellas show us where his cache is, an' then git to hell out of here!" he ordered.

"No savvy cache," one replied.

"Okay. You don't git paid, then. We'll give you each an ounce a day fer the time you've put in, if you'll show us where the dust is."

WITHOUT a word one of the Indians indicated a fissure in the rock, a short distance away, and a few minutes later the three took their departure, each clutching his little poke of dust.

As they passed out of sight the little man turned to Black John: "And you mean—all this is mine? All the gold, and everything?"

"Shore as hell."

"And—it's all legal, and everything?"

Black John shot the little man a reproachful glance. "Why, Joe—shorely you wouldn't think I'd stoop to an illegal act."

"No, no! I didn't mean that. Of course you wouldn't. I—I just can't hardly believe it—that's all. But—half of it's yours," he cried impulsively. "I'd never had any of it if it hadn't been for you." I'll deed you half of it, right now."

"No," the big man replied, "there's certain technicalities that makes it onwise fer me to hold property in Alaska. I won't bother you with the details, other than to say it runs back to a matter concernin' the army. Of course if you feel like takin' me into pardnership in this proposition, I'll be damn glad to comply. I ain't fool enough to turn down an interest in the best strike that's be'n made sence Bonanza. I'd rather remain as a sort of silent pardner, though. I don't need the scratch of a pen from you to know I'll git my share of the dust. I know an honest man when I see one. So now you kin send fer yer wife an' family, an' build you a big house here—big as that man's in Minneapolis you was talkin' about. An' yer yard will be bigger'n any damn park you ever heard of. An' the kids kin swim an' ketch fish in the lake, an' roam in the woods like yer wife wanted they should."

The little man shook his head. "No, I don't think Stella would like it here. It's too far away. There ain't no school for the children. And there's no one to talk to."

"Hell—they could go to school in Dawson! An' as fer talkin', she could talk to you."

"That's the trouble. Stella does quite a lot of talking. It's all right if it's spread around among a lot of people. But I wouldn't want it all bunched on me. I guess we better get that little place out in the country, like she wanted."

"But—who'll run this layout here?"

"Why, I figured maybe you would."

"W-e-e-l-l, it's a leetle further into Alaska than I'd prefer, if I was to pick my location. But I guess mebbe I could work it. I could put on a gang an' cut a trail from here to Cush's that a man could travel in a couple of days of lively goin'. That is," he added with a grin," providin' I don't run out of spit findin' my way back here agin. An' I could put on a crew to git out the dust. Besides which, I kin put you on a steamboat fer the outside, with cash enough in yer pockets to see you back home, an' a draft on Minneapolis to take care of them Christmas presents, an' that there place in the country."

"You mean—you'll lend me all that money, on top of that board bill in Dawson—so I can get back home by Christmas!"

"It ain't a loan—merely an advance. But with you way off there in Minnesota—how the hell will you know yer gittin' yer proper cut?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You're a droll fellow, Mister Smith. Look what you've done for me, already! Why—just looking at you anyone would know that you would never cheat anybody. Listen—what's that rumbling kind of a sound? It sounds like thunder—way off there toward Halfaday."

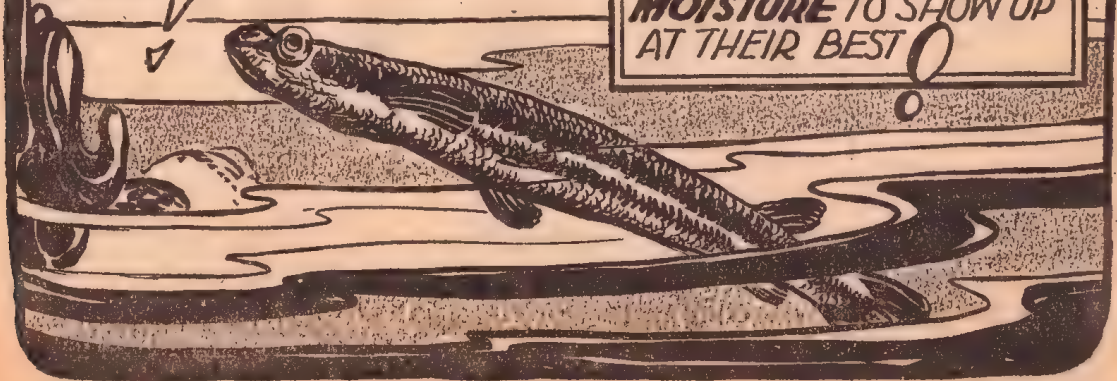
"It might be, at that," grinned the big man. "More likely, though—it's a couple hundred fellas turnin' over in their graves."

Curioddities By Weill

FALCONRY WAS THE NATIONAL SPORT IN ENGLAND AT THE TIME OF THE **CRUSADES** *AND HAS DONE MORE TO MAKE THE ENGLISH SPEAKING PEOPLE A RACE OF TRUE SPORTSMAN* ***THAN ALL THE REST OF OUR PASTIMES PUT TOGETHER***

ANABLEPS, THE FOUR-EYED FISH OF THE AMERICAN TROPICS HAS ONLY ONE PAIR OF EYES, *BUT EACH EYE IS DIVIDED INTO UPPER AND LOWER SECTIONS.* THE UPPER SECTION ACTS AS ITS **"AIR EYES"** WHEN FEEDING AT THE SURFACE, WHILE THE LOWER **"WATER EYES"** *RETAIN THE NEARSIGHTEDNESS OF THE NORMAL FISH AND ARE DIRECTED* ***DOWNWARD***

PEARLS ARE THE RESULT OF A SMALL "ITCH" IN THE FLESH OF AN OYSTER WHICH STIMULATES A SORT OF PROTECTIVE CALCIFICATION. IF LEFT IN A VAULT THEY ARE INCLINED TO DRY OUT, *AND* ***SHOULD BE WORN FREQUENTLY*** *AS THEY REQUIRE* ***SKIN MOISTURE*** *TO SHOW UP AT THEIR BEST*



WHO KNOWS WHERE HALF THE GOLD PRODUCED SINCE 1492 IS? *See Curioddities next time.*

"If They's a Cowman's Heaven Anywheres, This Is It. On a Still Dark Night I Won't Be at All Surprised to See the Spirits of My Old Blanket-mates That's Dead and Gone, Out Yonder in the Valley A-ropin' and A-ridin' and A-cussin' and A-fightin' Jest Like They Uster. Shore Enough, She's Plumb Heaven."

Too Damned Good For Thieves

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "The Ways of the Wolves," etc.

IT WAS the second year of the big drought in Texas and tempers were short, gunhands nervous. Many cattlemen had picked up the remnants of their herds and wandered far in search of range, sometimes fighting to the death over a patch of grass and a piece of water. Only the toughest horses, cows and men survived.

With his herd dying of thirst five miles behind him and water flowing in the valley a short distance ahead of him, Jack Mason, trail boss, was determined to shoot his way to the river if need be. That's what he told the two riders who now blocked his path and ordered him to take his cattle elsewhere, or take the consequences. The fact that they were Long Jim Baker's men and Baker ruled all that remote part of Texas by force of arms made slight difference to Mason. Buffalo Valley was public land. He had as much right to it as the other fellow.

His sooty black eyes blazed far back in their sockets where months of dust, heat and hardship had driven them. His voice rasped from a dry throat, "You go and tell Baker that I'm locatin' on the Buffalo, two thousand head of mixed cattle and a ramoother of a hundred ponies and eight mules. I done scouted the valley. There's room for both of us, and to spare. I'm a-movin' in this evenin'. Just you tell him that."

Stub Jensen and Slats Young tightened in their saddles like men about to do something and not yet certain what it was going to be. They used a moment to look the trail driver over more closely.

From his tall blue's shod hoofs to the crown of his battered old hat there was a resemblance between horse and man. Each was dark and savage of visage, sunk-eyed and hollow-cheeked, long and lean of flank, scarred by horns and hoofs and brush, underfed and overworked, but plainly too cussed to take a licking and almost too tough to kill.

Smoky, the horse, stood with weight on all four feet, ears at a dangerous backward angle.

He rolled his eyes at the two well-fed and watered ponies before him as if he were half a mind to tackle them both at once and tear the beasts in pieces. Mason sat squarely in his saddle, hands folded over its horn. Somehow, his long bony fingers gave the impression that it wasn't

far to the holsters which rode low on his thighs.

Stub Jensen, stocky and sandy-haired, suddenly asked, "Did you say that your name is Mason?"

"Yes."

"Black Jack Mason?"

"Some folks call me Black Jack."

Stub glanced quickly at his companion. Each nodded slightly. Then he inquired, "Did you ever meet up with a fella by the name of Coon Carson?"

"Yes."

"Then you're the Black Jack who killed him!"

Mason's swarthy face didn't change a particle. "I am," he said quietly. "We shot it out in the Beehive at Fort Griffin a while back. He was the slow man."

An envious sneer came and went on the Baker rider's heavy face. He said, "They tell me that the other fella is always the slow man when he tangles with Black Jack Mason."

"I cain't help what they tell you," retorted the trail boss curtly. "I gotta get back to my herd now."

He lifted his reins and swung his horse halfway around without taking his eyes from the Baker men for an instant.

Stub grinned maliciously. "All right, mistah. We'll let the boss know that you're comin'. I got an idee that he'll be mighty glad to see you. Coon Carson was his cousin and he thought a heap of Coon!"

The tall cowman shrugged carelessly.

Jensen and Young rode away.

As Jack Mason put his tired horse onto the trail again, he muttered grimly, "Well, Smoky old hoss, I reckon Long Jim Baker cain't kill us for more'n one thing at a time."

TWO hours later, with three hours of daylight left, the Mason crew had watered out and thrown their Bar M Bar stock on good feed for the first time in weeks. The cattle were strung unguarded along the river north of the entrance to Buffalo Valley and Spot Mason, Jack's thirteen-year-old brother, was holding the remuda a short distance south of there. The outfit had camped at the ford. Claude Cozad and Tommy Ingram were in the stream with the chuck and calf wagons, swelling felloes so as to tighten tires that had given trouble over many a dry mile. The wrinkled old Mexican cook, Emancipacion—called Mancy—already had a big meal and a huge coffee pot on the fire.

Jack, his father and two hands, all worn to the bone and haggard from loss of

sleep, were resting on bedding rolls nearby. He was reviewing discoveries made when scouting the valley a week ago.

"You'll recollect that Baker's headquarter's is at the springs ten miles notth," he was saying, "and from here to the end of the valley fo'ty mile south there ain't nothin' but a dugout now and then and a stockade cabin or two with nobody livin' in 'em."

"No pens?" asked Matagorda Barnes, a little dried-up old twister who had carried the Bar M Bar iron ever since Amos Mason first registered it in Matagorda County twenty years ago.

"Nary a pen," answered Jack. "Don't need 'em. There's a whole slew of box canyons with steep walls that make first-rate corrals. Some of 'em have got grass and water, too, springs that stood the drought."

"How much stock did you say you found in here?" asked Lem Johnson, a wiry man, sober and middle-aged, who had stuck with the outfit through thick and thin, tobacco money for wages at times.

"There wasn't two thousand head in the whole damned valley," answered Mason, "but it was like I told you. The sign showed that stock had been comin' and goin' all the time, thousand of hosses, cows and mules."

He went on to say that this tended to substantiate the rather general suspicion that Buffalo Valley was a sort of thieves' market place where horses stolen in Montana might be exchanged for others lifted in Louisiana, where Mexican cattle were swapped for Texas cattle and vice versa. This suspicion was further strengthened by the fact that Long Jim Baker was known to be a thief and a raider on both sides of the border, although the law had never caught up with him. He had been able to keep other outfits away from the valley because of its isolation, the dangers attendant upon a fight with him and the fact that in normal seasons there was sufficient range in Texas for everybody.

"That's the lay of the land as I see it," concluded Jack, "and, boys, I figger that we're due to ketch hell."

"Recollect, son, we shore don't want no trouble with nobody," said his father, a mountain of a man with heavy white hair that fell to his shoulders and a beard to match it.

The others looked away from the old man, trying hard to hide the pity they felt for him. In his day a frontiersman and Indian fighter famous for his valor, known far and wide as Roarin' Amos Mason, he had struggled through the drought with unfaltering courage while his holdings dwindled from twenty thousand to a meager twenty-five hundred head. During all this time his booming laugh and virile profanity had bolstered the spirits of his men. Then six months ago his wife died. He broke down. His aggressiveness gave place to timidity. Where he used to boss his own cattle drives, point his herds into flooded streams and lead his hard-bitten crew in battles with bandits, he now drove the calf wagon and shrank from every form of conflict. The doctors had said that time or a complete change might heal the old man's mind. Meanwhile, the Bar M Bar hands treated him with the respect that was his due, but they looked to his tall son for leadership in this fight to save all that remained of a once great brand.

"We won't have no trouble if we can h'p ourselves, Dad," answered Jack kindly. "After dark tonight we'll start movin' south on this side of the river. There's a big box canyon down yander that's got grass and water enough to carry our stock for several days. We'll hold close to it until I get things fixed up with Baker. I heard he's a mighty careful and cautious fella and don't never do nothin' rash. That's what makes him so all-fired hard for the law to ketch."

The old man shook his white head, muttering, "I got a feelin', son. I'm askeerd —askeerd like I was befo' yo' mamma died."

Jack Mason had not yet got used to hearing his father talk that way. It hurt. He turned his tired eyes to the level grassland beyond the thin line of timber and willows on the river. A restful scene after months of barren desolation, dry streams and waterholes, dead and dying cattle. A good country, this. A cow could make her a living and put on beef in this country. He'd stay here in spite of hell.

A moment later he caught sight of a rider coming up the opposite bank of the river and pushing his horse along. Jack drew his legs under him, sat on his heels. He glanced at Lem and Matagorda. Evidently they, too, had seen the stranger, but no one said anything. Jack wished that his father was somewhere else.

The newcomer splashed right by where the young hands, Claude and Tommy, were working on the wagons. He didn't notice them. They thumbed their noses at his back. Riding a beautiful California sorrel with a silver-mounted saddle and bridle, the big blond man made a striking figure in the colorful dress of a range dandy.

"Looks like Buff'ler Bill with his long hair and that flashy riggin'," drawled Matagorda.

"Looks like trouble," muttered Lem Johnson.

Amos Mason suddenly became aware of the stranger's approach. He said timidly, "Take keer, boys, take keer! We mustn't have no trouble."

Jack kept silent, frowning beneath the broad brim of his hat. His drawn face was even more haggard now. He made certain that his holsters hadn't shifted, that his guns slid smoothly.

The rider trotted his high-strung palomino from the ford to the fire, reined in suddenly on the windward side, kicked dust over everything. Old Mancy hauled off and heaved a pothook with all his might. The stranger ducked, but the sooty rod whipped through the yellow hair that hung in heavy waves on his shoulders. The sorrel reared, spun on its hind legs and would have bolted if the man hadn't curbed it savagely. He jerked the horse around, dropped a hand to his gun. His eyes blazed at the wrinkled old cook.

Jack Mason was on his feet now. He drawled, "Better go slow, stranger!"

He stood perfectly still with hands on his hips, a long and gaunt and somber figure, ragged clothing, a black jaw and a swarthy face. The blond dandy ran a scornful eye over him as if he were something unpleasant to look at. Jack went hot from head to foot.

"Shut up, trash!" barked the stranger. "No damned greaser can—!"

"Yes he can, mistah, and I'll side him all the way!"

Jack paused for an instant, then continued, his drawl dangerously soft, "This here Tejano is the best range cook in Texas and I wouldn't noways swap him for a hundred fancy dudes like you."

The rider's smooth florid face took on the color of the red sash he was wearing. He growled, "Who in hell are you?"

"Ain't you met up with Jensen and Young lately?"

"Not since mornin'."

"Well, sah, I'm Jack Mason, foreman and trail boss of the Bar M Bar. And who are you? Not that I give a damn."

Veins stood out on the dandy's thick neck. "I'm Frank Prince, general manager of the Buffalo Valley Ranch. Ever hear of me?"

*

JACK'S long eyes narrowed a trifle. So this was Fancy Prince—said to be a bad man with a gun.

The tall cowman folded his arms, teetered back onto his run-over heels. "Can't rightly say that I have," he drawled insolently, "but that don't make no difference. When old Gabriel blows his hawn hell will be chock full of gents that I never heard of."

The blond man swung to the ground, dropped his reins. He hitched up his

belts and strode purposefully to where Mason was standing. The cowman read the sign, cursed to himself. Gun work in sight. Prince had too much sense to start it while straddling a flighty horse. Had guts, too—damn him! Fixing to tackle the four of 'em. Jack sure wished that his dad was somewhere else.

"Listen to me, you scourin's!" growled Prince vehemently. "I'm tellin' you to move your mangy tick-ridden outfit away from here before dark. Understand?"

"And s'pose we don't?"

"Then I'll come and smoke you out!"

Amos Mason lifted a hand as if to ward off a blow. "We'll go, mistah!" he exclaimed in a faltering voice. "We'll go, 'cause we don't want no trouble with nobody."

Without turning his head, Jack spoke quietly over his shoulder, "Take it easy, Dad. You're mighty tired. I'll handle this thing."

The old-timer settled back on a bedding roll like an obedient child. "You're right, son. I'm plumb petered out."

Jack Mason the cowman was Black Jack the gunfighter now. He concentrated every faculty upon the deadly task confronting an enemy. No move of Prince's, whether conscious or unconscious, escaped his fierce black eyes. He knew that it had to be Prince or him, regardless of what he might say.

Nevertheless, he went ahead and said the things that he thought were right. "Looky here, Prince. We lost better'n seventeen thousand head in the big die-up and another five hundred gettin' here. You've got more grass and water in this valley than you'll ever need. We'll move to the south end and leave you be, but mistah, we've come to stay!"

"You'll stay from now on, if—!"

He stopped, stared past Jack, pointed. "Look out old man! Don't you——"

Like a flash he started his draw.

The old trick. A sardonic twist touched the swarthy gunfighter's thin lips. He fired an instant before Prince's gun left its holster. The blond man staggered. He jerked his weapon free as if it had hung. The pistol wavered uncertainly, blindly, like something alive but fatally wounded. Slowly, as time is measured in such lightning-fast encounters, a look of mingled surprise and amazement spread across Fancy Prince's big face. He couldn't believe, it seemed, that this shaggy stranger had beaten *him* to the draw and driven a bullet through him with an old wood-handled gun.

Jack Mason stood motionless. Only his eyes moved, alert like a long black leopard's, and as savage. He watched Frank Prince wilt into a heap of range finery. He blew the smoke from his gun.

Mounted on a fresh horse ten minutes later he forded the river, leading the California sorrel. The dead man was tied face-downward across his silver-mounted saddle. His gunbelts and fine white Stetson hung from its horn. His long yellow hair floated on the water, but that couldn't be avoided. Jack was taking him home.

From low in the west the sun was slanting its red beams over the rim of the valley when Mason rode up to the Baker ranch. There was no one in sight. An old adobe house sprawled on naked ground and scowled at him with windows like small deep-set eyes and an open door like a toothless mouth. He heard laughter, loud talk and the clatter of dishes back in the wing on his left. They were having supper in the kitchen, no doubt. He dropped his reins at the corner, took the sorrel and walked to the kitchen door. His boot heels clicked on the hard ground, his spur rowels jingled.

A Mexican in a greasy apron came to the door. His eyes and mouth popped open, then he swore in Spanish.

"I want to see Baker," said Mason curtly. "Tell him to come out here."

The cook stood still, staring. Behind him someone whispered excitedly. Talk and laughter ceased. Jack guessed that

Jensen or Young had recognized his voice. A bench scraped on a clay floor. The Mexican got out of the way.

Long Jim Baker was taller than the door and half its width. A hawk face and a perpetual stoop that caused his black head to thrust slightly forward at the end of his long neck, gave him the look of a bird of prey and his reputation strengthened the resemblance. He, too, froze in his tracks staring at the palomino and its gruesome burden. His lids pulled down slowly over his small eyes until their pupils were partly hidden, his lips clamped into a thin line above his pointed chin.

Jack Mason stepped up quickly and handed him the reins. "He said his name was Frank Prince and allowed he lived here," declared the cowman quietly, "so I brung him home."

Baker jerked his gaze from the dead man to Mason. He snarled, "You went and bushwhacked Fancy, damn you!"

"You're a liar," said Jack in a conversational tone.

Afterwards, he added, "I hadn't oughta call a man a liar when he ain't heeled. Go and climb into a six-shooter and come back here."

Apparently at a loss for words, Baker again fixed his eyes on Prince. The light of conviction dawned slowly in his face.

Seizing what he thought to be the right moment, Jack went on to say, "Yes, Baker, he's dead. He come to where our Bar M Bar is camped on the river and told us to get out. We had some words, me and him. He made his play. I shot him."

Long Jim Baker was stunned, thrown completely off balance for the moment. A mystified frown creased his narrow forehead. He looked down at the tall cowman, and demanded, "Are you crazy? Don't you know that you're takin' one hell of a chance bringin' Frank in here thisaway? It don't make sense!"

"Yes, it does," calmly replied Jack. "We've moved into Buffalo Valley to stay. I want you to see what happens when somebody tries to run us off and I want you to know that we ain't afraid of you. I ain't takin' much of a chance here, Baker. If you was to sic your gang onto me I'd get *you* before they got *me* and you know it."

He paused, glanced through the door past the tall man. A muscle twitched in his sunken cheek near the corner of his mouth. "For instance, if that fella behind you makes a pass at his gun I'll plug you first and take my chances with him."

Baker's head swiveled on his thin neck. "Be careful in there!" he snapped. "Can't you see that this black devil is crazy? He killed pore Coon and now he's killed Frank!"

"I'm crazy, all right," drawled Mason, "just crazy enough to fetch the fight to you if you start it. Recollect that, Baker. Now, here's the way the cards are a-fallin'. You keep the north thirty mile of the valley. It's the best range. We're locatin' on the south twenty and we're a-ridin' our north line. Better let your boys know 'bout it so's they won't make the mistake that Fancy Prince made. Reckon that's all I got to say."

The outlaw showed his native caution by saying nothing. His glance drifted over Mason as if he were taking the cowman's measure with the utmost care.

Jack retreated a few steps toward his horse, halted opposite a solid wall practically out of range of the door or any window. He commanded sharply, "Come out here, Baker!"

The tall man didn't make a move. He started to say something.

"Come on!" barked Mason.

Long Jim stood perfectly still with the palomino's closed reins hooked over his arm.

QUICKER than the eye could follow, Black Jack whipped out a gun and fired. The bullet gouged a chunk of adobe from the wall inches above Baker's head. Dust showered over him. The sorrel reared, whirled, lunged. It jerked Long Jim well out into the yard before he could turn loose or dig in his heels to hold the spirited horse. A racket arose in the kitchen, men scrambling for weapons laid aside in conformity to custom before they sat down to eat. Mason clenched his jaws. A fool play to start with, this might end up bad for him. He backed quickly to his horse where he could command the front door and windows, and he talked fast.

"Look, Baker!" he growled. "I know that with you out of the way my dad's troubles are over. I'm itchin' to cut you down, even if you are nekked. Tell your men to behave or I'll set you on the trail to hell and make a run for it!"

During the space of five seconds the issue hung in the balance. Baker showed that he was no coward, though cautious. His eyes darted from Jack to the horse, to the dead man's guns. He measured his chances, calculated the odds.

If Long Jim made a fight there'd be hell to pay, thought Mason. So he said quietly, "Try it. Wish you would."

Before Baker could move or say a word Jack caught the flash of metal in the dusk beyond the nearest open window. He called upon the speed and accuracy that had made a name for him in cow towns and on the cattle trails, snapped a shot at the flash. His bay pony threw up its head, flinched, but stood its ground. Somewhere in the room a man coughed.

The palomino was acting up again. When Long Jim got it quieted he had a closer hold on the reins.

Without once taking his eyes from Baker and the adobe Jack swung his horse around, off side to the house, and eased himself into the saddle. Men were moving and talking low inside. It looked bad. The nearest cover was a bank on the spring branch a hundred yards west. Although the bay was a cutting horse and mighty fast for a short distance, it was a twenty-to-one shot that he wouldn't make it before they turned loose at him. He saw Long Jim edge a foot closer to the sorrel and the dead man's guns. He thought hard. From where he sat two doors and two windows were in sight. The gun in his hand had but three cartridges left. He switched to his other six-shooter. Baker edged six inches more.

Mason suddenly let out a piercing yell, enough to scare any horse, and sent a bullet into the hard ground under the spooky palomino's nose. The animal reared, lashing with its forefeet, broke away from the outlaw. Jack turned his gun on the house, emptied it into the doors and windows.

As the thunder of his last shot rolled down the valley he dropped low on his pony's neck. The little fellow lit out for the spring branch as if he were racing to turn a long-legged steer. Pistols roared and rifles cracked before they reached the branch. One bullet glanced from the cantle of Jack's saddle, another furrowed the pony's hip and a third gashed the flesh at the roots of his mane. Three inches lower and it would have knocked him down. He leaped from a six-foot bank through willows into the bed of the shallow stream.

Mason released his breath, grinned. "A purty fair job of work, Snooks," he told the pony. "Keep on a-ramblin', fella, but don't you fall and bust somethin'. They'll know better'n to chase us. It's comin' dark."

JACK MASON'S daring visit to Baker's headquarters produced the effect he had hoped for. It made Long Jim even more cautious. By taking the offensive that way the cowman prevented an immediate attack which might have been fatal, since the outfit was in an exhausted state and otherwise unprepared for defense. Three days

went peacefully by. Jack had an idea that Baker was waiting for reinforcements, perhaps a gang of thieves with stolen stock. At any rate, the Bar M Bar made good use of the time that luck or Long Jim gave them.

They started at daybreak after the killing and pushed southward twenty miles. There the valley narrowed down to less than two miles in width for a thousand yards or so, afterwards opening out to its original width of from five to ten miles. The box canyon which Jack had previously discovered lay a short distance beyond this narrow point, on the east side of Buffalo River. He camped the wagons at a spring just inside the entrance to the huge natural pasture, a quarter-mile gap with precipitous walls, and loose-herded in the valley opposite it. Spot held the remuda in the canyon at first and they cut posts and put up a rope corral for changing mounts.

At noon on the third day Jack met Matagorda Barnes in camp when the old-timer came off guard.

Mat stepped down, pushed his hat to the back of his bald head, showed his ragged teeth in a happy grin, and declared, "Jack, my boy, if they's a cowman's heaven anywheres this is it. On a still dark night I won't be at all surprised to see the spirits of my old blanket-mates that's dead and gone, out yander in the valley a-ropin' and a-ridin' and a-cussin' and a-fightin' jest like they uster. Shore enough, she's plumb heaven."

This thrilled Jack to the bone, for he already loved the place. "Much obliged, Mat, but we may have to fight like hell to hold onto her."

"Then, by the Etarnal, we'll fight!"

"Uh-huh, we'll fight," muttered the cowman with a faraway look in his tired eyes. "And I figger it won't be long now."

Mat glanced up quickly. "How come?"

"I topped out on the east rim early this mornin'," answered Jack, lowering his voice, "and I seen dust in the north. I scouted it. A bunch of eight ten fellas was pushin' a band of hosses toward the valley hell-bent. That'll give Baker all the men he needs to raid us. So I'll be layin' out tonight. You take charge. Shove the cattle in here before dark. Make three one-man guards here at the mouth. Don't look for me until you see me comin'."

The old hand's leathery face showed all its lines now. He said, "I'm mighty sorry to hear that, but we'll be fixed for 'em when they come."

Squinting up at Jack, he went on to say, "Looky here, boy! You ain't had more'n fo'ty winks ary night in the last six months and I betcha you're a-packin' saddle sores as big as yo' hat. You stay in camps and let me do the layin' out. I done put on so much fat my crotch is galled and my paunch is a-ridin' the hawn."

Jack shook his head, smiled down at his little dried-up friend. "Nope, old-timer, I dassn't trust you. A man as fat as you are cain't stay awake."

He turned and looked back at his father in the scattered trees near the spring. His hard face softened. Amos Mason had a longhorned cow anchored fore and aft to saplings. Her calf had died and he was trying to persuade the brute to adopt another calf that had lost its mammy. The cow was red-eyed and full of fight and the old man was working on her.

"Keep a eye on dad," said Jack. "He's gettin' right frisky since we put him on good grass and plenty water. Went and roped hisself a mean pony this mornin' and he rid the durned thing, too. If trouble breaks, keep a eye on him."

Jack took the two roughest horses in the Bar M Bar remuda. He rode Simp—short for Simpleton—a tall Roman-nosed roan who shook a man's teeth loose at the start of each day's work, then carried him farther and faster than any other horse in the outfit except Smoky, Simp's partner and Jack's long horse. He led Smoky. Whenever he thought he might have to gamble his life on the horse between his knees he rode Smoky, a smart, vicious beast who fought for the love of it and was practically un-

beatable where the going was tough or the distance great.

With thirty miles ahead of him the tall cowman struck a fast gait and held it. He followed the river north, taking advantage of the cover afforded by its sparse timber wherever he could without materially slowing his speed. Things were doing in Baker's end of the valley this evening. Twice he hid in willows upon sighting other riders. Five miles south of ranch headquarters he came to a small opening on the river, floored by good grass and completely surrounded by trees and brush. There he picketed his horses, filled himself up on cold biscuits and fried beef, and stretched on the ground to rest until twilight.

As he lay with hands clasped beneath his head gazing up through a wild china tree he saw a hawk, suspended like an inanimate thing against the background of a multi-colored sky. The bird seemed to be behaving itself as well as a hawk could behave. Suddenly a very small bird swooped down from above, struck the hawk and zoomed, dived and struck again and again before the big bird could do anything about it. Then the hawk took out for somewhere else in a hurry. That little old kingbird had the right idea, thought Jack, 'cause he socked trouble before trouble had a chance to sock him—exactly what the Bar M Bar was trying to do.

Jack Mason and the shadows of night rode into Buffalo Ranch headquarters together. Tying Smoky below the cutbank on the spring branch, he took off his spurs and leather leggings and went afoot along the path from the spring to a clump of bushes near the stables and corrals behind the house. He passed within sight of the open kitchen door. Each side of the long table was lined with men at supper. They'd be talking, too, and he'd give anything to know what they were saying.

Jack went on to the main stable, walking leisurely. He figured that with so many men around, anyone who saw him would mistake him for somebody else if he wasn't behaving suspiciously. Counting the horses in stalls he found ten, all under saddle. Five more were tied to wagons and posts outside. Something on the fire for tonight.

Mason stood just inside the stable door and made a quick study of the house. The kitchen wing of the U-shaped adobe was lighted, three windows and a door spilling yellow beams into the patio so that a man couldn't hide in there. But why hide? Why not walk right up and listen and gamble on getting away with it? No one would ever expect to find him there. He'd do it, by dogies!

Jack headed for the house, taking long steps like a hungry man late for supper. He didn't feel nearly so loose as he looked. Every nerve was tingling. His hands itched for the comforting weight of his guns. He fought down an urge to duck and dodge and hunt cover. His bootheels sounded like pistol shots out there in the still night. He wanted to walk on his toes. But he took a firm hold of himself and strode on naturally. He passed under the first window, halted between it and the patio door, stood with his back against the wall. Felt like a damned fool standing there that way, but he could hear every word that was said. He quickly heard enough to tell him that they had been discussing a raid on the Bar M Bar tonight.

The next thing he heard was a husky voice inquiring, "What does this here gun-sharp Black Jack look like?"

Long Jim Baker answered with a good description.

"That's him, all right," declared the husky voice.

"D'you know him, Pete?"

"Nope, but I seen him shoot his way out of Loya's *cantina* in Matamoros one night. He throwed a heap of lead in a mighty short time and didn't waste none of it."

Carefully keeping out of the light, Jack stole a glance through the door at the speaker. He was sitting next to Baker at the head of the table, a dark bulky man with the look of a mixed blood.

A younger voice inquired, "When do we start, Jim?"

"Soon as we finish supper, if Pete and his boys are ready then."

"We'll be ready," replied Pete gruffly, "but before we go we gotta have a understandin'."

"What about?"

"There mustn't be a damned one of this here Black Jack outfit left to tell what happened to the balance of 'em, Jim," answered Pete. "Me and my boys have been doin' business on both sides of the border for five years and today we can ride anywhere in Texas or Mexico without havin' the law on our tails, all because we leave just one kind of witnesses behind us."

"What kind is that?"

"Dead witnesses!"

"Suits me," said Baker. "I've allus thought that was the safest way. I don't never believe in takin' chances. I'd ruther make shore and that's one way to do it. We'll give the hosses a little more time to feed and hit the trail in thirty minutes or so."

Pete said, "Looks like we're in for a big night, boys, with two thousand cows and a hundred ponies to lift, not to mention a right lively brush with some tough Texas men. I got a little prime stuff in my beddin' roll. You-all wait here. I'll get it and we'll have a snort before we go."

SEVERAL men shouted their approval. A bench scraped on the hard floor. Pete would doubtless come through the patio, since he was seated nearest that door. No place for Jack to hide. Stooping, he slipped under the window on his left and darted around the corner as the big breed came out. Mason's thoughts raced. He didn't need to listen any longer. He knew what to expect now. His job was to throw a scare into this gang so as to hold them back until his outfit got ready for 'em.

Jack walked toward the stable, making it appear that he had come around the other corner of the kitchen. The moon was full in his face. He pulled his hat lower. Pete came along, swinging his big shoulders and setting his heels down hard.

He hailed the cowman, "Where you goin', Slim?"

Pausing for him to come abreast, Mason answered, "Figgered I'd take a look at my pony."

The breed's head jerked around. He stopped in his tracks, peered closely, then burst out, "Why, you're—!"

"Yes," softly.

Pete was wearing no guns, Mason didn't dare to shoot. Each whipped out a knife. The breed stabbed, simultaneously opened his mouth to yell. Lean and wiry and fast on his feet in contrast to his burly antagonist, Black Jack fought with the speed and savagery of a giant cat. He blocked Pete's knife arm with his left, slashed with his right. He slashed at the man's throat, had to stop that yell. The cry ended in a gurgle. It could not have been heard through the talk and laughter in the kitchen. Subconsciously Jack Mason may have thought of the outlaw's "dead witnesses," but consciously he was driven only by the ferocity natural to his breed of fighting men. He plunged his knife into the man's heart. Pete sank down squarely in the path from house to stable. Mason left him there.

The tall cowman hurried to the barn. He ran from stall to stall cutting tie-ropes, driving the horses out. Stirrups banged against walls and partitions, caught on things. Ponies snorted, squealed and went to fighting. They'd hear *this* racket at the house! Dodging flying heels and snapping teeth Jack ran to those outside. He cut them free. Every cinch had, of course, been loosened when the horses were put up. More than one saddle turned, set its wearer to pitching. The spookiest horse of the lot was a coyote bronc. Jack jerked its saddle under its belly. The beast went wild. The whole bunch stampeded. Some of those horses would head straight for their home range, perhaps hundreds of miles away. All

of them would run for a little while, though a few gentle animals might stop quickly. Take time for men afoot to round 'em up. There'd be no raid on the Bar M Bar tonight!

Men were tumbling out of the kitchen now. Mason figured that few would stop to buckle on their weapons, since the noise was plainly that of horses fighting. He made a dash for the clump of bushes part way to the spring, looking over his shoulder as he ran. He saw Long Jim Baker galloping down the path to the stable, saw him pitch headforemost over Pete's body.

The moon was infernally bright now. Someone caught sight of the fleeing cowman. A yell went up. Two or three guns ripped the night apart. Bullets split the air around Jack, slashed at the bushes as he darted behind them. Other men went racing back to the kitchen. There'd be plenty guns in action damned soon. No sense in waiting there. Bending low he called up the last ounce of energy in his tough body and ran. He ducked and dodged and did everything possible to make of himself an elusive target in the moonlight. Guns flashed like giant fireflies with the power to kill a man. Lead tore at everything around him, plucked at his clothing.

From the kitchen door came the splitting crack of a rifle. A bullet furrowed Mason's scalp at the base of his skull. It seemed as if a redhot knife had cut a nerve that controlled every muscle in his body. His limbs collapsed. He fell. His thoughts were clear, made it worse. He could see one hand and both legs. He recognized them as his, though they might as well have belonged to someone else. He couldn't move them. A hell of a feeling!

Jack could see the house, too. Those big old lightning bugs had blown out their lanterns. Firing had stopped. Men were yelling like hounds with a coon up a tree. Now they were coming his way. Not fast. Afraid to come fast. Every fella was holding one or two guns as if he expected something to jump up and bite him.

Lying on his side in the path, Jack wondered how much of him they could see. Wished to the devil that he could turn onto his belly. They couldn't see any part of him then. He glared at his lifeless legs. He cursed them in his thoughts, for he was that kind of man—a ruthless man when the fighting heat was on him.

"Yonder he is," yelled someone. "I got him!"

"Like hell you did!" cried another. "He's mine."

Quarreling over his carcass like wolves, thought Mason. He looked at his hand. Felt funny. It's fingers were closing, slowly, but they were moving!

It seemed a day. It was only a moment before the temporary paralysis passed, leaving his body and limbs leaden but movable. He dragged both guns from their holsters, squirmed around until he lay facing the cautiously advancing outlaws.

"Look out!" bellowed a man. "He ain't dead yet."

Black Jack opened fire, alternately right and left, mighty slow for him, but coldly accurate. He saw one man fall hard, another drop to hands and knees and go to crawling, a third reel—then they all scattered for cover. He got up and blundered down the path like a horse with blind staggers.

They were slow about cutting loose again. He figured that he might make it to the spring. Glancing back he saw three men mounting a short distance south of the stable; gentle horses that hadn't run far, or they had tangled in their rigging and thrown themselves. He heard Long Jim Baker yell for soneone to cut him off. Two men ran from the front door, dropped in

the yard and went to shooting. Then everybody went to shooting. Half a dozen bullets missed him by a hair. Lucky it wasn't daylight, he thought. Five seconds later he staggered behind the cutbank and through willows to where Smoky was waiting with head up, nostrils flaring. Jack pulled and hauled himself into the saddle, took a firm grip on the horn and told the horse to go.

When the blue horse ran it was up to the man on his back to take care of himself. With bullets crackling through the trees above him and other horses thundering in pursuit on the far side of the stream, Smoky ran like a deer in shinnery. Ears laid flat and head stretched until it almost formed a line with his neck he leaped washes and fallen trees, went through clumps of brush with a twisting lunge when he might have gone around, dodged limbs with inches to spare and to hell with the rider. Unguided he ran under cover of the timber in preference to open ground on his right. Old Smoky could hear those bullets a-whistlin', thought Jack, hanging on like grim death and getting stronger every second. Pretty soon the bullets stopped coming, but the pursuing hoofbeats were still there. He swung the blue to the right until clear of timber, sounded a long and defiant yell and they sped like a shadow down the silvery floor of the valley. Shortly thereafter the outlaws emptied their guns and he heard no more of them.

Jack Mason beat the moon to bed and he saw the day awake. Coyotes on the rim of the canyon were singing their serenade to the dawn that was creeping up the earth below the horizon when the Bar M Bar outfit gathered at the wagon for breakfast. The guard at the entrance had come in and the hands were all there.

After giving them a modest and greatly abbreviated account of the night's happenings, Jack went on to say, "Don't you think for a minute that Long Jim Baker is licked. He ain't done no fightin' yet. He's a slow starter, Long Jim is, but everybody allows that he's hell on wheels when he gets goin'. All I figger to do is to keep him bogged down until we're set, then we'll have it out with him."

Matagorda Barnes sopped a chunk of hot bread in sorghum molasses. "Why not lets us raid him and his den of thieves tonight?" he suggested. "This is heaven and we'd oughta cast the devils out."

Jack's neck was stiff. He turned his body to grin at Mat. "Long Jim tallies no less'n fifteen, twenty fightin' bandits. We got six men and a boy. If it's all the same to you, I'd ruther not."

The weasened old-timer snorted through his hooked nose, reached for the big black pot and poured himself another cup of coffee. He cuddled the redhot tincup in his palms, cocked an eye at Jack.

"Jest you gimme two quarts of this here liquid gunpowder of Mancy's and I'll raid the damned den all by myownself," he declared. "Powerful fine brew, Mancy. How old is it?"

The wrinkled Mexican looked out from beneath a greasy sombrero that rode deep, almost to his shoulders. Without cracking a smile, he replied in Spanish, "Thank you, Don Barnes. This coffee is a blend—the oldest four weeks, the youngest last night."

"Bully! It's smooth and mellow 'cause it's aged in the grounds."

Everybody grinned or chuckled, except Amos Mason. The white-haired giant laughed aloud, the first time in six months. It wasn't his old booming laugh, but it thrilled Jack to the bone and he silently blessed ornery old Matagorda Barnes. Then he thought, nothing like grass and water to heal a cowman's hurts.

A SHORT while later Jack and his father sat their horses in the entrance and watched the herd drift into the valley: lean, long-geared longhorns, big steers and cows that had recuperated quickly and were already showing the effects of good feed and water, sprightly little calves responding to the new strength in their mammies'

milk, all tough brutes with a fighting spirit equal to that of the men who guarded and upon occasion fought them. They had won their fight to live and they'd go on fighting, for such was the nature of their breed. Jack Mason thought of them that way. He loved his cows. His heart beat faster.

He said, "Them Bar M Bar's of ourn shore are a-perkin' up, Dad. They'll be wallerin' in fat before snow flies."

"Yes, son, we allus had good stuff in our brand," agreed the old man thoughtfully. "I only hope that we got some of it left come snow."

"What makes you say that?"

"With all the thieves they is in this here valley, boy, *no* brand can hold a cow." *

Jack looked his father in the eye, and said quietly, "We're goin' to clean out the thieves, Dad. I made up my mind to that last night. Buffalo Valley was put here for honest cows and cowmen. It's too damned good for thieves. I made up my mind to that when I heard Pete a-braggin' 'bout the dead witnesses he's left behind him."

Amos Mason slowly shook his white head. "Be keerful, son, mighty keerful."

Then he smiled with his eyes, a thing that he often used to do. "The Bar M Bar is plumb crippled down now and it needs you to tail it up."

The swarthy young cowman laughed. He liked to hear his father talk that way.

"All right, old-timer, I'll start on you," he said. "Go back and grab your rifle and climb outa here. There's a wolf path over yander that ought to carry your weight. If it don't I reckon you won't fall more'n twenty feet. Injun down behind them soapweeds on the point and keep a eye open for Baker scouts. I sorta look for 'em today. We don't want 'em to see what we're doin'. Make 'aste, now. Get up there before it's light enough for 'em to spot you if any of 'em happen to be a-hangin' 'round. Mat's already up on the other side of the canyon mouth with his Winchester."

The burly old man chuckled. "Never thought I'd live to see the day when I taken orders from a young bronc that I whupped with the double-of-a-rope many a time."

He swung his horse around. "Say! Whereabouts are you goin' to be while I'm a-riskin' life and limb up yander?"

"I gotta go see a fella, Dad."

"Huh! Make shore that you see him fust."

Jack grinned. His old fighting dad was coming back to life, all right.

He rode out with the tail cattle. They drifted the herd south for a ways on the east side of the river and dropped it there. Those cows wouldn't leave the valley. They had too much eating and drinking to do. Lem, Claude and Tommy left them unguarded and went back to the canyon to dig a rifle pit and build a small breastworks in the trees at the spring.

Jack forded the river and went to where his gangling freckled-faced brother was grazing the remuda. After cautioning the boy not to get within rifle range of anything that would hide a bushwhacker, he added, "If these here ponies take a notion to run, fella, you let 'em go clean to hell. Don't you dast foller 'em into the river timber or close to the rim."

Spot's big mouth spread in a grin that split his freckles wide open. "Look who's tellin' *me* how to wrangle a ramoother."

"You *better* look, durn your speckled hide!"

Mason started away.

"Where you headin', Black Jack?"

The swarthy cowman didn't like that name any too well and his kid brother knew it.

He growled, "I'm goin' to see can I ketch me a polecat."

"Aim to gentle him and use him for a Sunday hoss?"

"Nope. I'll de-skunk the thing and use it for a wrangler. So 'long, bub."

Jack put Simp into a long lope and rode two miles north on the river to a giant

* An old-timer's way of saying that brands would be blotted, altered and otherwise rendered ineffectual in protecting the stock that carried them.
C. C.

maple almost completely smothered by mustang grapevines. By that time the sun was coming up. Tying the roan in a small arbor at the base of the tree he took his rifle and climbed through the dense greenery to a point where he could look out across the valley in all directions. He made himself comfortable and practically invisible and settled down to wait.

Mason was playing a hunch. He believed that Baker would be more cautious than ever as a result of last night's experience and carefully scout the Bar M Bar before making another attempt to raid it. He looked for those scouts to show up today and expected them to do some bushwhacking if they could. Long Jim was bound to know how hard it would be for a small outfit to ride herd on its stock and at the same time guard against sniping when greatly outnumbered. Jack aimed to carry the fight to him again if he tried it.

The sun said it was ten o'clock when he first saw signs that he had guessed right. Looking out across the parched plains east of the valley and north of his tree he saw a column of dust break the flat line of the horizon and move southward, towering in the still air like a lazy whirlwind. Three or four riders—maybe more, and they were rackin' along. Pretty soon he sighted a larger dust cloud north and west beyond the rim of the valley coming south and it, too, was ramblin' some. Might be six or eight under that dust, hard to tell. If those were Baker men there ought to be another bunch coming down the river through the timber before long, holding back so as to give the outside riders time to move south of the Bar M Bar's north line and swing into the valley. That way they'd more or less surround the Mason outfit.

Jack eased the breech of his rifle open enough to make certain that he had already chambered a cartridge. He watched closely the dust in the east for that bunch would run onto his father if they undertook to reach the point nearest camp, the bluff where the old man was stationed. Eventually the dust disappeared. They had slowed down or maybe stopped to change to led horses, having come a long way fast this morning. He wished that he hadn't put his father up there.

Those in the west went on until they were well south of his tree, then vanished. They had gone into one of the many small canyons where they could change to fresh horses and follow a sag down to the river timber unseen by anyone not right on top of them. Pretty soon they'd have the Bar M Bar surrounded, all right.

Jack Mason shifted uneasily, for although he figured it was the right thing to do he hated like the devil to roost in a tree while killers stalked his outfit. He worried about Spot. The boy was good to mind, but you never could tell what a salty kid would do when mad or excited. He didn't dare to go back and relieve Spot. If he allowed Baker men to work their way down the river from the north they could hide in the timber and pick off the boys at camp or his dad and Matagorda on the bluffs, since the stream ran within easy range of the canyon entrance. Of course, he *could* move everything into the canyon and hole up. But there wasn't a horse, cow or man in the outfit who would like that, and if he did it once Baker would make him keep on doing it. He reckoned they'd better fight.

Fifteen minutes later Jack Mason knew that he wouldn't have much longer to wait. Four riders were coming down the river abreast, trotting their horses in the shade on the west bank where timber would hide them from a lookout at the Bar M Bar camp. The cowman's thin dark face tightened. With infinite caution he moved so as to have a clear view through a small opening in the vines and get a good rest for his rifle across a limb. Simp's head and ears were up now. He sure hoped that the old cuss would keep his mouth shut. Jack was disappointed to see that Baker wasn't one of the riders, then he figured that Long

Jim had no doubt gone with the east bunch for the purpose of scouting the box canyon and the camp. Baker might run onto his dad or Matagorda Barnes over there.

The rider nearest to the timber wasn't more than ten feet away from it. Mason cocked his rifle, took aim as coldly as if he were shooting at a mark. The air was dead still now. The old tree seemed to hold its breath so as not to disturb the rifleman's aim. He fired. At the crack of the gun the nearest horse kicked high, then swerved violently to its right, driving the others well into the clear away from the trees. Jack's bullet had creased its nigh hip.

"Stick 'em up!" he roared.

The outlaws were fighting to control their mounts. One dropped his reins, lifted both hands and let his horse pitch. A lean red-headed man jerked a gun, fired at the tree top, sank home his spurs and dashed for the timber. Black Jack shot him. The horse plunged into the trees. A limb snatched the dead man from his saddle, held him aloft a moment, dropped him. Another outlaw raised his hands. The fourth peered hard into the curtain of swirling smoke that almost hid the vines. He seemed at the point of making a fight. Jack fired again. A bullet whipped off the fellow's hat. He put up his hands.

"Unloose your belts!" barked the cowman. "Be mighty keerful how you do it!"

The three men obeyed, gingerly avoiding their gun handles.

"Throw 'em far's you can!"

Each of the outlaws hesitated. Though nothing was said, Mason saw them swap glances. He'd be in a hell of a fix if they all cut loose at him. No time to waste in argument. He took quick aim. His rifle exploded after a scarcely noticeable delay. Its bullet caught a burly man's cartridge belt inches from his hand, jerked it away from him. The others threw theirs as if they were hot to the touch.

"Line up single file, nigh side to me," commanded Jack. "Make 'aste!"

They reluctantly obeyed.

"Pile off!"

Each man dismounted as if it were an effort to get down.

"Yank your bridles!"

Again the outlaws hesitated. Each glared up at the tree top. Give them half a chance and they'd fight. Jack had staked everything on the fear inspired by an accurate rifle at close range. He now drove it home to them.

"Get busy or I go to bustin' legs!" he growled. "I cain't miss from here."

Off came the bridles.

Mason fired again. The outlaws flinched. A bullet bounced from the cantle of the lead horse's saddle. It stampeded. The others followed. Having no reins to stop them, they'd run for a while.

"All right, you mangy bushwhackers," barked the cowman, "hit for home! Cut across the valley. Stay clear of the timber where I can see you. Hoof it, damn you!"

The Baker men cursed him in the vilest language, then hobbled away.

Coming down so fast he almost fell from the tree, Jack ran and gathered the outlaws' weapons. Simp must have known that this was no time for foolishness when his master hit the saddle and lifted him off the ground with his spurs. The tall horse flattened his ears and set the grass afire as he raced for home.

Upon reaching the bottle-neck in the valley the first sight that greeted Mason's anxious eyes was a cloud of gunsmoke that hovered ominously over the point where his father was on guard. More smoke blossomed up there, followed by reports of a rifle coming in rapid succession. Jack went to breathing again. Bully for the old-timer! Maybe this was just what he had been needing. No sense in worrying about *him* any more. When Amos Mason was right, give him a rifle and leave him be. He'd take care of himself.

Jack sent Simp plunging through the timber and across the stream. Before him the valley swept away to the south, its level expanse broken here and there by low

swells and shallow draws. He soon caught sight of Spot and the remuda. The boy was obeying orders, all right. The horses were grazing a flat and he was sitting his pony a safe distance from the river timber where he could see a long ways in all directions. Mason felt easier now, slowed down a little. A few minutes later he saw a horse leave the loosely-held band, first at a trot, then a lope southwest across the valley —that bunch-quittin' Mexican claybank, no doubt, for it was eternally trying to get back to the Rio Grande. And he saw the boy take out after it!

Jack stood in his stirrups. He waved his hat, yelled. Spot couldn't hear him, but he didn't think of that. He thought of the outlaws who had gone down that side and disappeared somewhere in the direction his brother was going. He followed the kid with eyes, cursed that Mexican pony and swore he'd shoot it. He threw away the extra weapons he was carrying so as to lighten the load on his horse. He fed the iron to Simp and poured profanity into the tall roan's ears. And he rode like hell.

Simp gained fast and Jack had hopes of overtaking Spot before the stray carried him onto dangerous ground. Within gun-hearing now, he emptied his six-shooter in the air. Spot glanced back. Off a way on the wrangler's right, smoke burst out of what appeared to be level ground. The boy's pony stumbled, sommersaulted! Then came the bark of a rifle. Spot lit rolling. He got to his knees. Another spurt of smoke, a report like an echo of the first. The boy toppled backwards. Jack watched breathlessly for the kid to get up. Spot didn't!

The swarthy cowman's face went black, his lips blue. He pointed the roan at the smoke, kicked hard, rode light, thoughtless of the danger of running onto a man with a rifle that way. Ahead crawled a wash that floods had gouged in the flat. He saw the bushwhacker, saw the smoke from his gun, heard the whine of a bullet past his head and felt the wind of it. He rode with his face in Simp's mane, talked to him, begged for more speed. The roan's big muscles bunched and rolled and twisted under him like steel things with life in them. Again the would-be assassin's rifle cracked. Simp flinched in midstride, but kept his feet. He plunged on, staggered, thrust out his head and strained as if he were dragging a great weight. His mighty muscles gathered into knots for a final effort, then the life went out of them. He fell.

Black Jack sprang clear. Without an instant's hesitation he ran a zig-zag course at the smoke. He thought he heard the bark of a rifle somewhere off on his right and behind him. An echo, of course. He didn't look back. Sunlight glinted briefly on the barrel of a gun in the wash. He dodged and swerved and steeled himsel for the shock of lead. Once more there came what he had thought was an echo, the ripping report of a rifle like the tearing of strong cloth. He glanced around.

Smoke was boiling up from Spot's dead horse.

Bully for the kid! Played 'possum and scared the hell out of a fella, though, damn his speckled hide!

Jack literally flung himself ahead. Stub Jensen was running up the wash, heading for his horse.

"Halt!" snapped Mason.

Maybe Stub was a boy with ambitions, or maybe he lost his head in that exciting moment. At any rate he dropped his gun and threw up one hand, whirled with a six-shooter in his other and went to shooting with a lot of speed and no accuracy. Jack shot to cripple the boy down, shot low. Stub fell with a broken leg and all the fight gone out of him.

AN HOUR later the Bar M Bar men gathered at camp to compare notes, make plans and eat dinner.

Seated with his broad back against a wagon wheel Amos Mason was eating and talking at the same time. His white hair

and beard showed the stains of blood from a scalp wound, his eyes flashed their old fire and his voice packed a punch again.

"Boys, I ain't been so infernally mad in a coon's age," he rumbled. "Them skunks left they hosses in a draw and set out to Injun our camp afoot, three of 'em. I jest laid low and let 'em come. Long Jim Baker was amongst 'em. Purty soon I drawed a bead on him and let him have it."

Everybody took notice.

"D'you mean that?" exclaimed Jack.

"Sartinly!" growled the old man. "Only I didn't hit him none. They all jumped fo'ty feet straight up and come down a-runnin'. I burnt three more ca'tridges on Long Jim and missed him slick as a whistle. Then, damn his sunk eyes, he stopped and cut loose at me and creased my scalp and I hadn't touched a hair of his head. And I says to myself—sez I, 'He's a ha'nt, that man is'! Never you mind laughin', Jack Mason! I knowed he's a spirit, 'cause I don't miss flesh and blood thataway."

Jack wasn't laughing at what his father said about ghosts. He was laughing from sheer happiness at seeing the fiery old man pawin' the ground and kickin' up dust again.

"Aww, fiddlesticks, Dad," he drawled. "Don't you try to talk spirits to us. Betcha you was skeerd so bad you sprayed lead same as if your Winchester was a scattergun."

"Why, you young—!"

"Whoooa-*up!*" growled Matagorda Barnes. "I crave peace and brotherly love and if you two wildcats don't stop clawin' each other I'll lambaste the pair of you."

Amos Mason regarded his tall son with a deep twinkle in his eye, and went on to say, "As I was fixin' to tell you—when Baker and his boys had gone I taken a look at my rifle, and damned if its front sight wa'n't mighty nigh a quarter of a inch off center. Reckon I knocked it loose when I was climbin' the bluff."

As one man the Bar M Bar burst out laughing, the old-timer loudest of all.

Under cover of the diversion and after a cautious glance at Emancipacion, Matagorda helped himself to a slab of dried apple pie, it being his habit to start a meal with pie if any was available.

"Damn it, Amos!" he said with a mouthful. "Why didn't you leave some of them polecats for me. Baker must've sent his hands home so's to keep 'em outa range of yo' deadly rifle 'cause he rid alone clean around the canyon to my side, but you done spooked him so bad he never comes within gunshot of me. I set over yander a-nussin' my Winchester, a-honin' for a fight and nothin' happened."

The old-timer scowled over a tincup of black coffee at his weazened friend. "Mat, you're a lop-eared liar! You burnt a heap of powder and made a hell of a racket for some reason or other."

Matagorda solemnly reached over to the Dutch oven, speared a chunk of young heifer with his bowie knife and went to work on it.

"Who? Me?" he asked. "Oh, yes, I recollect it now. I seen fo' five rannies a-slidin' through the river timber and taken a crack at 'em, that's all. Never did hit nothin', though. One of 'em must've put his foot in a hole or somethin' 'cause he hobbled off a-hangin' onto another fella. 'Twa'n't no fun. Nobody shot at *me.*"

Jack horned in to stop an argument, "Now, as I see it, Long Jim will either come to us a-packin' wampum" (peace talk) "in the mornin', or he'll boil down here tomorrer night a-packin' war. He's got to do one or the other. We're carryin'

the fight to him and he cain't afford to put up with it no longer."

"Shore hope it's peace," moaned Matagorda.

"I like peace—for a change," drawled Amos Mason.

THE following morning came in with a bright sun and a clear sky, a day fit to stir the joy of living. A big bullsnake had crawled into Matagorda's bed during the night and somehow he managed to put the thing to sleep in Amos Mason's boot without rousing anyone. The old boys discussed the matter all through breakfast and were still at it when they rode off with the cattle later on. Smoky pitched like hell and came within an ace of piling Jack, and everybody laughed fit to kill. Old Mancy had hummed a rollicking Mexican folk song while making the bread extra light and the coffee extra strong, and he coiled a two-foot horse hair in the bottom of the cup that Matagorda got. The remuda bit and kicked and played the rough game of colts when Spot shoved it into the valley. Little calves butted one another and their mammies and even tackled longhorn steers who took it playfully, and two of the Bar M Bar's surviving bulls went to talking fight before they reached the river. Every last thing was full of the Old Nick this morning.

But Jack Mason carried a burden of uneasiness that he couldn't shake off. He rode completely around the box canyon examining every foot of its walls again to make certain that a horse could not get in or out at any point, satisfied himself that it would be impossible for mounted men to attack the camp from the rear. Time and again he went over his plans for defense and concluded that they were the best that he could do. After dinner he climbed the wolf path to the point and stood for a long while, a gaunt grim figure gazing into the north, watching for Baker, waiting for the outlaw to come with a peace talk and feeling in his bones that he wouldn't. Not that it would make any difference in the end, for he had resolved to drive the thieves from the valley. But a visit from Long Jim today would mean no raid tonight. He scouted the country north for miles and came in at dusk with a leg-weary horse, a tired body and a heavy mind, for he had seen nothing of Baker or any of Baker's men.

Jack went up to the bluff on the north side of the entrance to stand an all-night guard, believing that to be the weakest point in the camp's defenses since attackers could shoot down into it from there. The moon was full and devilish, tossing weird and deceptive shadows around. A stiff breeze whistled across the valley and into the canyon from the west, carrying the snarls of big gray wolves as they fought over the carcasses of the dead horses. Jack tried to banish a mental picture of Simp out there. All horse, that big roan. Old Simp knew that he was charging a rifle, but he kept right on a-ramblin'—went down fighting. From time to time one of the wolves would lift its voice in the long drawn-out howl of its breed, a blood-chilling thing that made a man's hackles rise either in fear or anger. Jack hated those beasts. They preyed upon colts, calves and cripples, and he likened them to their human counterparts with whom he was waging a battle to the death.

He looked over the brink of the bluff at the camp. The wagons stood end-to-end with harness and truck piled under them as if for defensive purposes, and between them and the canyon wall tarps were spread in natural fashion. On each of the beds was something that looked like a man asleep. But the Bar M Bar crew was lying in a shallow rifle pit behind a low breastworks, secreted in the trees that surrounded the spring thirty yards west of the wagons. With the exception of the night horses all of the outfit's stock had been thrown into the canyon, well back, and left unguarded. Jack alone was on guard. He thought it foolish to scatter his little force, wise to

concentrate their fire from one point when fighting against odds.

The tall cowman lay prone in the shadow of a big soapweed with his rifle beside him, straining his eyes and ears and calling upon a knowledge of plainscraft acquired while living all his life on a dangerous frontier. It was somewhere around ten o'clock when he suddenly became aware that the noise of the wolves had stopped. This might mean a great deal, or nothing at all. If Baker men had ridden down the west side of the valley to a point south of the Bar M Bar's north line, then headed east toward camp with the strong wind at their backs the lobos would've caught their scent and fled. On the other hand, the wolves might have gorged themselves and gone some place to sleep it off. Hard to tell. Have to wait and see.

While he waited many things appeared in the moonlight to put a strain on tight nerves. Men and horses that turned into shadows. The flash of metal in the river timber—white owl making a kill. An object moving in bunch grass like a man crawling—a measly coyote. A point of fire on the river bank that might be a careless smoker taking a last drag—a lightning bug. Splashes in the stream like animals stepping in to ford it—frogs diving, fish jumping. Something slithered through shrubbery at the base of the canyon wall. He tossed a pebble down there. A huge cat bounded away in tremendous leaps—a hungry panther attracted by fresh meat hanging in camp. He didn't like *that*.

Suddenly thunder came rolling down against the wind. But it *couldn't* be thunder. The sky was clear. He sat up facing that way, listened. Thunder—hell! A stampede. He had heard too damned many of 'em to go wrong on that.

MASON climbed down the bluff and ran to the rifle pit. The light sleepers there were already awake and very much on the alert.

"They're a-runnin', ain't they, Jack?" asked his father anxiously. "That there noise cain't be nothin' else."

"Yes, Dad, and somethin's wrong," replied Jack. "Our herd was trail-broke right and ain't never been spooky. Baker may be tryin' to draw us out, scatter us. Stay here and let 'em run. They won't hit you and they won't go far. Watch the canyon mouth. Watch everything! Devil only knows what Long Jim has cooked up."

Leaving unanswered questions behind him he hurried back to his post on the bluff. The thunder piled up until it swallowed all other sounds, even the wind. Those cows were sure runnin'! Jack thought of the she-cattle with calf. Damned hard on a cow to run like that when she's carryin' a calf. Lose a lot of 'em. And the little calves, wobbly-legged fellas. They'd be runnin', too, a-bellerin' for their mammies, goin' down, chopped to pieces. First a cowman then a gunfighter, Mason longed to go and fork his horse and take the lead and set 'em to milling and stop that run. But he dare not. If he had guessed right the outlaws would show up soon. There'd be hell to pay and, by God! he had the lead to pay it with.

The roar of the stampede beat against his eardrums and eight thousand or more threshing hoofs set up tremors in the earth. But Jack didn't look that way. He lay prone, making himself as much a part of the ground as possible, and resolutely kept his eyes on the bank of shadows that marked the limit of his sight out yonder on the prairie. Suddenly darker shadows appeared, two of them! Mason swore with relief. Thrusting his rifle forward so that moonlight caught its front sight he drew a bead on the nearest man, then lay dead still. The outlaws ran in half a crouch. They darted ahead a few yards, paused as if to look the ground over, then made a dash for the rim of the canyon at a point directly above the camp about twenty yards from where Jack was lying. The muzzle of his rifle followed his man with a patience that was savage. He waited until they were al-

most there, for he dare not miss, couldn't afford to let either of them get away. He fired. An outlaw staggered, stiffened erect, plunged headforemost over the twenty-foot bluff.

The other raider struck like a snake caught by surprise. He whirled. His six-shooter burst into flame. Meanwhile, Black Jack slapped his lever down and up and pressed his trigger again. He saw the outlaw spin half around. Saw the flash of the fellow's gun. Felt the sting of gravel that cut his face to ribbons. Things went black—blind!

As he lay for an instant face downward a bullet jerked at his hat, another burned a welt down his back, a third nicked his shoulder. Blind, maybe, but to hell with it! He wouldn't stay there and let that cripple gun him to death. He rolled over fast, over the top of the canyon wall, fell six feet to the wolf path, clutched blindly at roots and shrubbery which he knew to be growing there, slid, fell and scrambled to the bottom.

While battle and stampede raged near him Jack Mason lay at the base of the canyon wall, not conscious of anything other than the fear that he had lost his eyes. Frantically he jerked off his bandanna. He swept it over his lacerated face and gently wiped dust from his eyes with cloth saturated by his own blood. He could see a little, then. He saw the last of the cattle thundering past, horses behind them—the remuda. No! He saw men leap from those horses! They charged the wagons. A moment later a bunch of riders galloped in from the canyon entrance, passed between him and the cattle—one within a yard of where he lay, and they, too, charged the wagons. The raiders convered into a compact group as they neared the wagons, horsemen and men afoot. Jack worked on his eyes, clenched his jaws, held his breath.

The trees at the spring stood like tall dark sentinels glowering at the raiders, silent, dangerous. Suddenly orange flame leaped up in them, smoke burst from them. Baker men went down. Horses went down. Other frantic horses stomped the fallen. Men cried out, a horse screamed, guns roared beneath the thundering overtone of the stampede. Jack Mason worked desperately on his eyes.

Led by Baker himself the raiders fought viciously. Some took cover behind and beneath the wagons, others behind dead horses. Outnumbering the Mason men, they poured a stiff fire into the trees after the shock of surprise had passed. Jack could see a little better now. Things looked bad to him. He thought of his dad and Spot and all the boys, and he raised himself to one knee. Bullets from the guns of his own outfit split the air and gnawed the earth perilously close to him. He glanced around for cover. There was none. He saw the Baker men through a dancing film of blood and smoke and tears and realized that he couldn't do any execution with that kind of eyesight at that distance, anyhow. Have to get close enough to see to shoot.

He got to his feet, drew both guns. The wall cast its shadow over and ahead of him and rubble at its base made the going tough for a half-blind man. He had to almost feel his way along with his feet. Had to stay close to the wall, too, because Bar M Bar bullets weren't so thick there. Pretty soon one of the Baker men would turn around and see him and cut loose and—He'd have to go faster. He went to take a quick step, caught his toe in a root and plunged forward in long strides to keep from falling!

Some of the raiders saw him coming and evidently thought they were being attacked from the rear. They broke and ran. Others followed. Black Jack Mason staggered to a halt with legs wide apart, knees bent and guns afire. He was close enough to see now, close enough to see to shoot it out with Long Jim Baker and two of Baker's men—all that remained. Driven into a red rage by pain that threatened to split his eyeballs and burning with the heat of battle, he threw caution to the winds and fought

like an inhuman thing devoid of feeling for himself or mercy for the other man.

The very first blast from his guns knocked both of the Baker men down. Each fired while falling. One kept it up while dying on a pile of harness. Long Jim was hit an instant after he wheeled, but he refused to go down. With his thin lips drawn away from his teeth in a grimace of pain he hooked an arm through a wagon wheel to hold himself erect and swapped lead with his master in this deadly game of shooting to kill.

Black Jack's left leg collapsed, paralyzed by a bullet. He sat on it and shot even faster. A slug drilled his shoulder. The shock knocked him flat. He got to his knee. His right arm was dead. He emptied his left gun, snatched up his other.

Baker's men were still now. Baker *wouldn't* go down! His head lolled at the end of his leathery neck. His thin legs sagged at the knees. His six-shooter weaved blindly in search of the man who was killing him. He hung onto the wheel. He wouldn't go down.

Black Jack steadied himself, shot the outlaw in the head. Long Jim Baker fell slowly. His bony fingers clutched at spoke after spoke as he slid down against the wheel.

Jack Mason sat where he was, working on his eyes.

Spot and his father were first to reach him, Matagorda Barnes close behind them.

Amos Mason placed a big hand on his shoulder. "You made one hell of a fight, boy," he said huskily. "Did they hurt you bad?"

Spot and Matagorda bent over him anxiously.

Jack shook his head. "Knocked dust in my eyes and it hurts like the devil, and they set me afoot for a spell with a bullet in a leg and my shoulder. Reckon that's all. How're the balance of the boys?"

"They got winged. Not bad, though. Mancy's a-doctorin' of 'em now."

"Mighty glad 'tain't no worse," said Jack, "but I'd shore like to know how them Baker riders got in behind the cattle and snuck up on you thataway."

"Simple as ABC," declared Matagorda. "They clumb down the wall and eased our ramoother into a corner and roped 'em a hoss apiece."

"And I didn't have brains enough to figure on that," muttered Jack. "*I'm* the one that needs tailin' up, Dad. You boss this here outfit from now on."

"Shore, son! I'll boss 'er. Gimme a hand with this hospital stuff, Mat."

PERCENTAGE PILOT

By FRANKLIN P. MILLER

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT J. P., was the way his name was listed on the roster of the R.C.A.F. Ferry Command, but that was far from being the name the mechanics around the roaring hangars of Botswood called him. Most of their nicknames were not fit for polite society—"Bloody Yank" and "Jitterin' Grandma" were the least of them. But then, the roughnecks who service the Havocs and Catalinas before they hop across the pond to tangle with the Luftwaffe never figured that they were polite society.

I'm Canadian myself, but that bunch was far different from the quiet ground-crews that used to service my Hurricane in England, before I caught a burst from the nose guns of a Me 109, and found myself transferred to the Ferry Command. They were calling me Limpy, behind my back, two hours after I reported, probably because I was not fully accustomed to my new aluminum leg by then.

Anyhow, Bloody Yank was the least offensive of the names they hung on Johnny Jones, until they heard about our brush with a big Folke-Wulfe flying boat on the third trip I made as co-pilot under Johnny Jones' command. Then they began to call him Percentage Pilot, and to that gang there is nothing lower than a man who works out all the percentages, before he risks his neck.

For no special reason it gave me a pain in the neck to watch Johnny Jones spending hours over the field, getting the last ounce of power out of our twin-row Pratt and Whitneys before he would consent to take off for some unnamed airfield in England.

I knew rather well from experience how much those patrol bombers meant to our coastal command, and I resented every minute Johnny Jones wasted in making sure that all the percentages favored him. And, after that Folke-Wulfe incident, I was certain in my own mind that Johnny Jones was chiefly concerned in collecting the

Where the Havocs and Catalinas Hop Across the Pond—

to Tangle with the Luftwaffe. Just What Are the Percentages?

thousand bucks plus expenses which he made each trip.

I should have realized that it paid to be certain, and I should have remembered that John Paul Jones must know his business, for he had learned it the hard way, flying PBY's with the Scouting Force of Uncle Sam.

But, as I say, I saw Coventry on the morning after, and besides that I was probably too anxious to get back at some of the lads who were responsible for my trick leg.

ON THOSE first trips we traveled light, without bombs in the racks, and with a skeleton crew until we were sure that the Catalinas had a whole world of excess range. You see, we were never sure what one of dozens of fields we would have to land on until we were well within the zone where the Luftwaffe was operating. It all depended on what fields were catching hell in a handbasket from Goering's methodical lads.

For eight hours after we took off on our third trip, it was business as usual. Once above a high overcast that hung at six thousand, Johnny turned over the controls to me. All I had to do was check on the Iron Mike to make sure of the gyro compass.

There was no bombadier and no blister gunner on that trip. As I said, we could hardly believe the performance figures from the factory that turns out these Catalinas. We did have wing and blister guns, of course, but there was only a three man crew to man everything. Our navigator was a gray-haired, silent chap named Charleton who sat at his map table amidship and doubled as radio man. He never said much, and Johnny kept making inspection trips from the bombadier's pit clear back to the tail assembly, so it looked like the usual boring routine.

Twice Johnny relieved me for an hour, so that I could get out of the greenhouse and stretch. I know now that he understood how uncomfortable my aluminum pin could be.

But I was at the controls, about two hours out from England, when things began to happen fast.

Hull down to the starboard we sighted the smoke of a big convoy, and I banked a trifle to have a looksee. It is quite a sight to see a convoy steaming along about His Majesty's business, each ship neatly in column, with a light cruiser leading, a pair of little corvettes shepherding them anxiously on either flank, and a slim destroyer helping the rear along like a sheep dog keeping a flock in its place.

The destroyer happend to be a four-stacker that once flew the stars and stripes.

I was starting to go over high, to give the gun crews around their Ack-Ack a glimpse of our insignia, when white puffs of smoke began to blossom off our left wing tip. The fools have started shooting without waiting for identification, I thought; then Johnny Jones was in the greenhouse, wrenching the controls out of my hands!

"Let go, you fool!" he snarled at me. "Folke-Wulfe coming! On our tail! Give her to me!"

I released the column, pulled the snap on my belt. Half out of my seat, centrifugal force slammed me back as Johnny whipped her around like a pursuit at full performance.

Then Charleton's voice was coming through the interphones to my headset, quiet and confident.

"Blister guns manned, sir. Plane above to port. Ack-ack is after him."

"I see it!" Johnny rasped back. "Stand by for a spin. I'm going into it."

There was nothing for me to do. I sat and watched that ugly shark of a Folke-Wulfe swarming down on us with all four motors, and there wasn't a thing I could do, unless Johnny Jones was hit.

The nose dropped, and our twin engines howled into a savage song of power. The safety belt was loose, and I held on with

both hands as the Catalina pivoted on a wing tip then headed in a power dive toward the rutted iron of the sea.

Over my shoulder I glimpsed a flickering flame along the leading edge of the Folke-Wulfe's wings as she slammed by above us. Our blister guns got in one sharp burst, then the Catalina was shuddering like a horse shaking off flies in spring.

I knew what that meant. We had been hit. But Johnny was easing her out of the dive now, shoving her skyward with both props howling. For a second everything blacked out as centrifugal drained the blood from my head.

I remember thinking that a Catalina was not built for anything like this, then I could see again, and the Folke-Wulfe was a good thousand below us, dumping a load of eggs around the cruiser. Great geysers of water heaved skyward as they hit around her, but she was not touched. Her Ack-Ack was still spewing flame.

But now I understood what that Folke-Wulfe was doing. Far below a thin thread of white raced toward a lumbering tanker. Then the torpedo hit amidships, and a hundred thousand barrels of high test gas went up in one gigantic crimson flame. The blast tossed us like a cork, but Johnny had us under control again almost instantly.

THE convoy was scattering like a flock of ducks now, and that dainty old four-stacker was slicing back along the torpedo's wake at full steam. Then she heeled far to port in a half circle and poured six ash-cans over her stern.

"Now's your time," I yelled at Johnny. "That plane guided the subs to 'em. We're above her now. Take her down, old son!"

For an instant Johnny's hard eyes blazed at me, then he shook his head, and brought our nose around to due north.

"It's not our funeral," he snapped coldly. "They've got eight guns and a full crew. We're taking off!"

"You mean—you can't do it!" The meaning of his words was dawning on me now. Johnny Jones had figured the percentages was against him. He wouldn't take a chance and go down.

"You heard me. I'm giving the orders. Go back and man the blister guns. Charleton doesn't answer my buzz."

There was cold finality in his voice. But he was in command. I lurched back and found a chill wind whistling through a knife gash in the side of the fuselage. Then I was too busy trying to get a dressing on the holes in Charleton's chest to think of much else. It was useless, though. He had caught a full burst. He never spoke.

Some four hours later, after a perfect landing between the sheltering walls of a nameless little Scotch inlet, I heaved myself out of the seat of a borrowed Austin to have a chin with the squadron commander who had run our outfit's show at Dunkirk.

They had moved a dozen times since I left them, but Ferry pilots get special attention. I had tracked them down to get a load off my chest.

"Not only that," I concluded my recital, "but the bounder dressed me down properly. Said his orders were to deliver the Catalina, not to tangle with a Folke-Wulfe!"

"Must have had a good reason," the C.O. mused, sucking at a Dunhill. "Sure you weren't hasty? After all, you had only a three-man crew—and one of those was done."

"Hasty or not, I've had a bellyful. I want to transfer back to this outfit."

"With—er—ah——"

"Yes, even with one aluminum pin! It doesn't seem to stop Bader. Both of his are gone."

"Takes time, old son," the C.O. shook his head patiently. "You're already under sailing orders for a convoy early tomorrow. Sympathy, and all that. But I can't work miracles."

"Very well, sir," I said stiffly. "I'll put in my application officially. By the time

I bring over one more, something should be done. I'm through serving under a Percentage Pilot—that's final!"

Still hot under the collar, I stormed out and had my old sergeant major type up my request for transfer. Then I gunned the Austin for the embarkation port. These days in England, they give very little time for anyone to lay around. It was later that they started bringing us back in a clipper. In the early days we had to wallow back on a freight under convoy. But this was a different ship from the scaley tramps I was accustomed to.

Twice to my knowledge the dock I stood on had been hammered with incendiaries and high explosive, but only the plank falsework under foot gave an indication of that.

To the left was my ship, the eight-inch cruiser *Albion*—she was in on the *Bismarck* kill later. A sleek, gray, ten-thousand-ton fighter with the rime of the North Atlantic on her paint.

But the thing that stopped me cold was the passengers she was taking on her camouflaged decks. Not tough Ferry pilots like myself and Johnny Jones, not diplomats nor business men. She was taking children to Canada, where they could breathe in the sun and never hear the scream of air raid sirens.

The lights were dim and blue screened, but there was no mistaking the yellow hair of the girl who was holding one tow-headed boy in a last quick squeeze.

Her eyes telegraphed me a warning as the youngster left her.

And Johnny Jones, beside me, took the whole thing in.

"It's better this way," the girl told us quietly. "Over there he will be safe. I'm an air warden, you see, and it's enough to worry about Bruce, without having always to think of the little man."

"Yes, he'll be safe," I agreed.

But in the back of my head was the picture of that convoy with the subs swirling around it like savage sharks. If he ever got across, my C.O.'s son would be quite safe.

And for three days he was safe, then you know what happened. It made every headline in the United States. Out of nowhere a torpedo caught that P. and O. ship amidships.

The pure hell of it was that we could not wait to pick up survivors. Aboard the cruiser were more than forty of us Ferry Pilots. The *Albion* could only radio word

to the Atlantic Patrol, and take the rest of the convoy out of danger's way.

It was war at its cruelest. But the *Albion's* skipper had his orders to carry out, just as Johnny Jones had had his orders not to tangle with the Luftwaffe. For the first time I began to understand what must have motivated Johnny.

Johnny Jones looked at me strangely, as we saw dawn break over our convoy with emptiness where the big P. and O. boat had been. He shrugged his shoulders finally and strode to the rail, where he watched the tumbled waters of the North Atlantic silently.

Two days found us back at Botswood, in the middle of our old routine. No turn around time was allowed us. Catalinas were too badly needed for that. We were supposed to rest up on the trip back.

This Catalina was the first of the new models, and again and again we took her

off, checking engine performance, oil flow, tachometer readings. One of those big crates has over sixty instruments which must be perfect.

Only this time there was one difference. Our Ferry Command had made up its mind at last.

On Johnny Jones' recommendation we were going over with a full crew from now on, and the long bomb bay amidship was going to go fully armed!

There was a gray drizzle of rain falling, when we took off. Somehow it wasn't like Johnny Jones to start with a weather chart like that, and I saw him holding a stiff-lipped conversation with the new man, Jennings, who had taken Charleton's old job. It made no impression on me at the time, but I recall it distinctly now.

Ten minutes later we were at eight thousand, with the rugged coast of Canada falling behind us, and Johnny was on the prowl again, checking every member of the crew. A little man named Kerns was the flight engineer who doubled at the blister guns in combat. I've mentioned the navigator, Jennings, and in the bombardier's pit was a grinning, black-haired Irishman named O'Donnel.

The course didn't seem right to me, but that was Johnny's business. Plenty of latitude is allowed to the pilot of a Catalina, but it seemed to me that we were going too far to the south.

Hour after hour ticked by, routine stuff. Below was the gray waste of waters, without a ship in sight. The hungry gray waters that had swallowed up a tow-headed kid, I thought. I was uneasy in the greenhouse, and Johnny didn't give me the usual relief so that I could move around.

From time to time I could hear Jennings who ran the navigation and the radio tuning his air-ground set to frequencies that never had applied to our beam control. We fly by beam part of the way—never twice the same distance—before we get our landing orders and take off for the field on our own.

JOHNNY JONES was restless as a cat, I remember, never ceasing his constant watch beside the radio man. Seven straight hours I flew the plane before he slid into his seat on the double to take the controls instantly.

"Warm up the guns," he snapped, his face intent.

Mechanically I pressed the lever and let the six terrible fifty calibers yammer from our wings.

It was answered by a pounding warm-up from the blister, then yellow and green lights blinked on the panel. Bombadier, navigator, and rear gunner were all in combat place.

"Mind telling a chap what to expect?" I questioned sarcastically.

"I don't know myself," Johnny grinned crookedly. "You're not dumb. You know the course I gave you was far south of normal. Roughly it's the one we sailed on, coming back. It's a million to one that kid never got to a lifeboat. It's another million to one they're still afloat. Six days in the open sea—well, anyhow, we're taking a looksee."

"You don't order combat posts for a looksee."

"No. I meant to add, Jennings just picked up a faint S.O.S. on the frequency those P. and O. lifeboats should use on their emergency sets, if any are still living. Only this was too methodical for a hand generated set."

"You think?"

"I think nothing." Johnny Jones was grim. "But what a neat trick it would be for a sub to lie in wait—maybe send out an S.O.S. themselves—and get any rescue boat it might bring!"

The very idea of it was fantastic, unless you know Johnny Jones. But Johnny is the lad who figures all the percentages. And it did not seem so fantastic ten minutes later when Jennings told us through the interphone of the message he had just picked up.

"Answer to S.O.S., sir," he said quietly.

"Cruiser *Albion* calling. Tells them to keep their chins up!"

"Any position?"

"In code. About sixty miles due south, I judge."

"Keep listening," Johnny directed. "We're having a look around."

It was madness on the face of it. Here was Johnny Jones who had left a convoy to fight off its attackers on the last trip, and announced that it wasn't his funeral. Now we were headed into real trouble—a tow-headed kid had made all the difference.

The drone of our twin motors increased to full power as we slid down through the overcast to emerge at three thousand above a sea that looked like glass, but was harder than frozen lava if you ever were forced down.

Nothing but a long, gray, heaving expanse of it, flecked with white caps. I saw no sign of life. Maybe none of us would have seen it—except for the Folke-Wulfe which came surging down and gunned us from the eye of the sun!

Johnny stood her on a wing tip then. From the blister came the shattering roar of twin fifties at full gun. Kerns was cursing through the interphones as he tried to get a burst into the gray belly above us.

But my wing was down, and straight below I saw what the Folke-Wulfe was protecting! Barely awash was the black, whale-backed shadow of a Nazi sub. And scarcely a cable length from it was the tiny dot of an open boat in the heaving sea.

I had no time to tell Johnny Jones about it. A burst of steel from the Folke-Wulfe's tail guns shattered the greenhouse glass above my head, letting wind whistle through a cluster of star-shaped holes in the shatterproof glass.

My belly hit my Adam's apple as Johnny pulled us out of that diving spin. We had only our fifties to answer that Folke-Wulfe's twenty milimeter twin cannon. Only two motors to her four—but those two motors gave us better than forty miles more top speed. And none of us thought for a second of running.

In a screaming dive we followed the Nazi ship, and second by second it grew bigger in our gunsights. Johnny eased her ever so slightly to the right, until the cross hairs were at the root of one giant wing.

"Give 'em hell," he ordered through clenched teeth.

He was flying one handed. That burst through the glass had missed my shoulder and caught him just above the elbow band.

Six seconds I held the lever forward. Through the sight I could see hot steel gnawing at the Nazi's wing. A chunk of aileron flopped loose, dangled, and departed in shreds.

The Nazi pilot was good. He took a desperate chance that the wing would hold and pivoted on it to give his blister guns a chance. Only Johnny Jones had figured that, along with the rest of the percentages.

As the Nazi spun, my sight came full on the bubble-shaped blister. Through the glass I could even see the gunner's staring face. A three second burst tore the head off the man.

Then we were lunging above them, and Johnny laid her on her side to give little Kerns his chance. It could not have been more than a full second, but time was telescoped I think.

Kerns cursed joyfully. A sheet-like lightning split the Nazi wide open. Kerns had struck the bombs with his blast!

We were lifted as though a giant hand had slammed us. Desperately Johnny Jones brought her back with breakers a handsbreadth beneath. At that speed there would have been no trace of us to hunt for, had we hit the fluid iron of the sea.

Howling like banshees our twin motors lifted us skyward. Then, at six hundred, Johnny got his first chance to flip the steering column to me. Up to now he had flown one handed, the bones of his right arm grating.

The sub had waited a moment too long. In the control tower top I could see her

skipper going down the hatch, but two men were sending tracers skyward to keep us off her neck.

Our fifties crumpled them.

We were almost over them then, and the bombadier got into the game. The Catalina rose as four five-hundred-pounders screamed down in one long string.

At that speed a direct hit would have been a miracle, but I risked plenty of trouble to watch the spouting gouts of foam that followed the laying of our eggs. Two shorts, then the third sent a geyser spouting which obscured the conning tower and washed the two crumpled gunners into the sea.

We were way beyond them then, slicing above the small boat at furious speed. But there was time to see that her people were not dead. They were clinging in a huddle, watching our Catalina storm past them, waving white hands in greeting to our proud red, white, and blue cockade!

A sweeping zoom gave me room to wheel and come back on the sub. We had only our fifties against it now, for all our bombs had been released in that one stick. But there was no need for more of them.

Below us the sub had unpended, her propellers still spinning.

That burst alongside had crushed her strength hull like an eggshell under a trip hammer. A foam of men was boiling out of her conning tower, but not many of them made it. Slowly at first, then in a sliding rush it went under, the water foaming as her air escaped.

"Take her down," Johnny directed, while Jennings worked at getting an emergency splint on his smashed arm. "We can't wait for that cruiser to come up. Those kids have been seven days down there, as it is."

It is one job to land a Catalina in a protected harbor, but it's quite another to land one in the full sweep of the open sea. But that Catalina is a lady. Dainty as a gull she hovered just above the combers, settled gently, and rode the crest of a breaking wave.

Then the real job began. With our wing pontons down I had to gun her gently alongside that open boat where one false move, one unthought of error would let the seas wash her against us to spring our plates at the very least. Right then I wished mightily that I had Johnny Jones to figure those percentages for me.

Seven days since we had left them that boat had drifted. Four others had been picked up by the patrol, but the Germans must have known that we would not give up the one that had so many—not all—of the children in it. That was what the *Albion* had been doing in retracing her course after landing us, and that was what had made the Nazi's plan of using them so devilish.

Thirteen kids were in that tiny boat. Thirteen kids, a white-faced nurse who had watched over them, and four seamen. There had been more to start, but some of them had gone overside in the night while the nurse tried to prevent those children from knowing.

But they were not whipped. Above the drone of my idling motors I could hear thin, childish, valiant voices lifted. They were singing as our crew took them aboard.

"There will always be an England," was what they sang.

I COULD not see them come aboard. Someone had to keep the motors ticking, keep the nose up into those long gray combers. O'Donnel, Kerns, and Jennings had that pleasure while I waited. But it was hard to wait, wondering whether a certain tow-headed youngster just happened to be among them.

Even with them aboard our job was not yet finished. Three seamen from the U-boat were still swimming desperately. We could not leave them helpless in midsea. O'Donnel and Kerns used the lifeboat for that part of it while I still kept her head up to meet each racing wave.

It was while those Nazis got their chance to live that I got an answer to what was

bothering me. Through the interphones I could hear Jennings clicking off the list of rescued on our radio, reporting to the Coastal Command.

"Nelson, Alice—Haworth, Robert—*Stender, Bruce Junior—*" Jennings reported methodically.

Stender was my old C.O. you know. We don't like to disclose our squadron commander's name. But all the world knows his.

Even with our bombs gone, we had too much weight for takeoff, so I held her steady hour after hour until the boats of the *Albion* came up to lend a hand.

But Johnny Jones would not let them take the kids aboard. The seamen, and the sullen Nazi prisoners, yes, but not the game, worn-out nurse, and not a single one of those children.

We knew what the Catalina could do now. The cruiser would not land at full speed for forty hours. We could make it in two hours, and no Folke-Wulfe that ever flew could stand in our way.

The *Albion* dipped her colors in a king's salute as we took the air again. Only this time we did not land in any quiet Scottish firth. Screaming out of the sun my old squadron came to guard us home to land squarely on the Thames. We'd have welcome all of Goering's five Air Divisions, if they had tried to block us, after my old Squadron saw their C.O.'s son waving to his dad from the safety of our blister's shatter-proof glass.

HOURS later, in the quiet of the old squadron's operations office, my former C.O. settled back into his chair and got his ancient Dunhill going at full blast. We had taken shelter there to be able to think, for the pilots in the ready room were making a high wide and handsome night of it.

They had Johnny Jones, bandages and all, at the center of the long mess table where the pilot who had made the latest kill always sat.

"About that transfer; still want it to go through?" my former C.O. asked.

"There's some mistake," I assured him. "I don't remember anything about a transfer request."

"I was only asking as a matter of form," he grinned. "The sergeant major never forwarded it, as a matter of fact."

"Never forwarded it?"

"That's right. A very sound man, the sergeant major. He agreed with me that you'd change your mind. John Paul Jones you said his name was. There couldn't be anything wrong with a Yank who had a name like that!"

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Adventurers All

Elephant Country

THE native village of Musungo was situated on a small peninsula. On one side ran the river Lubudi, and on the other side it was hemmed in by a swamp the length of which I did not know, but I knew its width, for after a day's rest in the village I had to cross it and it would take me two days' march to do this. The lower point of the peninsula was cultivated by the natives who here had their maize and sorghum fields, while the upper end of the village was separated from the jungle by a manioc field about a hundred feet wide.

The huts in the upper end of the village had been turned over to my safari and my tent was pitched in the manioc field near these huts. It was a beautiful night with a bright full moon and the faint breeze wafted the wood smoke from the village up our way. The immense swamp was entirely covered with a low-hanging white fog and in the moonlight it looked like an endless carpet of silver. It was so quiet and peaceful that, knowing that I had two hard days ahead, I decided to retire early and get a good rest.

I had just started to undress when I heard the sentry outside my tent challenge someone and soon an argument started which became rather noisy. Opening the tent flap and slipping outside, I found quite a crowd had gathered and everybody was talking and gesticulating. My sergeant soon had them quieted down and he stepped up to me, followed by the chief of the village. He told me that a big herd of elephants had invaded the maize and sorghum fields eating and destroying everything, and he asked me to go down and shoot all the marauders.

You and your crowd just leave the elephants alone, I answered, "or you will have no village. Just stay in your huts and the herd will not trouble you." Very dissatisfied, he and his subjects shuffled off and soon all was quiet again.

I was hardly in bed when my fears materialized. A few old flintlocks barked down at the lower end of the village and were soon answered by terrible trumpeting from the herd mingled with the screaming and yelling of the natives. The darn fools couldn't leave well enough alone.

Losing no time I was out of bed, pulled a raincoat over my pajamas and picking up a rifle I emerged from the tent.

"Call the safari together, and quick," I ordered the sentry, and soon the soldiers, bearers and my boys came running over to the tent carrying all belongings and baggage. In a moment my things were packed, the tent taken down and we all made it as

fast as possible across the manioc field to the jungle, our only protection. Arriving there, we stopped to look back at the village, most of which by now was flying up in the air, tossed there by the maddened herd, who with a gruesome revenge destroyed and trampled everything in its way. Screaming, terrified native women carrying their yelling children streamed across the field toward the jungle and the whole scene, which a few minutes ago was so peaceful, was now a terrible bedlam. In the clear moonlight we could plainly see the huts flying skyward and also the bodies of many screaming natives.

In less than half an hour everything was destroyed and the herd, satisfied with its revenge retired to the big swamp to rest and settle down again.

Next morning before sunup we were ready for our march through the big swamp. The village was a shambles, not a single hut was left, papayes and banana palms were uprooted and destroyed. Here and there crushed bodies of natives were strewn over the ground, indeed a sad looking battlefield. Passing a bunch of natives I stopped and asked them:

"Where is your chief?"

"He is dead," they answered, "and Ilonga here is now our new chief."

I asked him if he were going to build the village someplace else.

"No," he answered, "just on the same place, this is the fourth time the elephants have destroyed it.

THE trail now swung down toward the swamp and as we neared it I saw to my left not a hundred feet from the trail the whole herd of elephants which the night before had destroyed the village. Ordering my safari to proceed quietly and to mind their own business we proceeded unhindered on our way. Most of the full-grown elephants stood sleepily leaning up against big trees, while five youngsters were having a great time splashing in the mud and squirting water on one another. None of the whole herd paid the slightest attention to us, just gave us an uninterested look and flapped their big ears as if waving us good-by.

I was very much relieved when that herd of war machines was well behind us, and we now settled down to our tiresome slushing and wallowing two days' march through slime and mire, reaching sometimes up to the native's hips and at times higher. The whole safari was slushing along single file following the narrow trail, hemmed in on both sides by reeds and grass ten to twelve feet high; no breeze, just the stink from the upturned mud.

I was traveling in a hammock which was slung to a heavy bamboo stick and carried by two natives. When the mud was deep they would have to carry the hammock with their arms stretched straight up to keep me above water. The gentle swinging motion of the hammock always did make me sleepy and after an hour's march I was as usual almost asleep, when I was instantly awakened by loud screams and a sudden submerging in the slimy mud.

Unable to realize at once what had happened, I nearly choked to death before I worked myself up to a sitting position. With mouth, ears and eyes full of slime I was unable to understand what was happening. Spitting out mud it took me some time to get a little air and cleaning my eyes I just caught a glimpse of the first half of the safari disappearing around the bend in the trail about fifty feet ahead, while I could hear behind me the other half slushing back the way we had come. My hammock had been right in the middle of the party and there I was, still spitting mud and slime wondering what it was all about.

Suddenly I heard close at hand to my left a queer sucking sound as if someone was pulling a big pole out of soft mud, and then a heavy splash. The tall reeds and grass on both sides of the narrow trail made it impossible for me to see anything. The sucking sound and the splash was re-

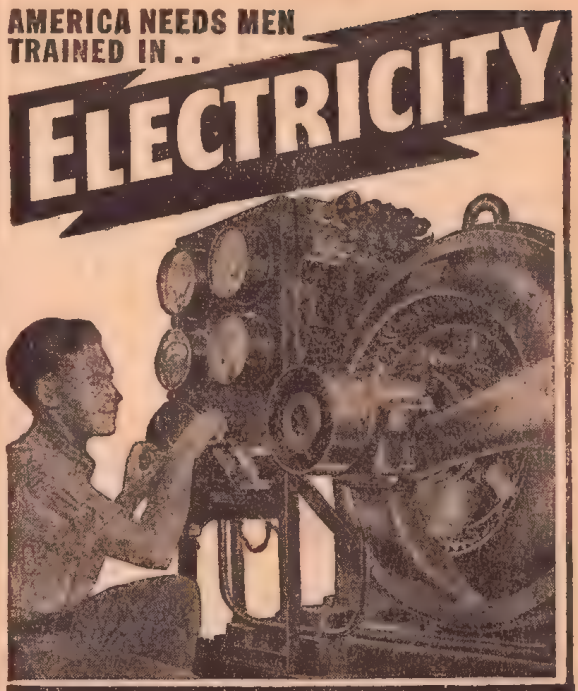
peated again and now by looking up over the top of the reeds I saw the cause of all my trouble. I could just see the top of the head of an enormous elephant. Two more steps and the big beast would surely step on me and obliterate me as a smear in the bottom of the swamp.

Unable to move I sat there watching the top of that head, and praying that the beast would not take another step. I was slowly settling deeper into the mud and the slimy water reached my chin, but to make the slightest move would mean sure death, so, terrified I had to sit there and just wait. I knew it was a full-grown bull who must have been chased out of the herd on account of bad behavior, and if there is anything more destructive and deadly than a lone bull elephant I'd like to know what it is. As I sat there, scared stiff, a big green and black snake about eight or nine feet long came slithering out of the reeds and crossed the trail not more than six inches from my face. I hardly paid any attention to it, I was so hypnotized with fear and kept watching the top of the head of that big beast to my left.

Then I saw his enormous big ears, like two big barn doors, lifted up over his head and flapped down with the sound of a cannon shot. This was repeated three times, and then the long, powerful trunk was stretched straight upward and slowly forward, emitting a trumpet call that almost burst my eardrums. The sucking and splashing sound came again and to my immense relief I knew he had turned away from the trail as I saw his head disappear.

I was still unable to move and it seemed as if every muscle in my body objected to functioning although the slime was almost up to my mouth. Not until my men came back and picked me up was I able to move and speak, and believe me I sure gave them hell. At the same time I could hardly blame them for beating it, although I impressed upon them that they could at least take their employer along with them.

Henry R. Nelson.



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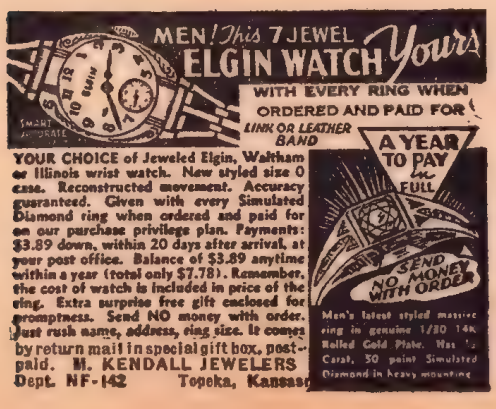
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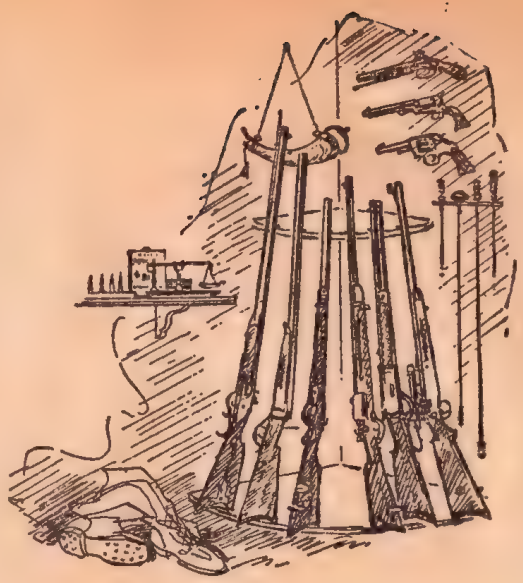

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF

Uncle Sam's New Blitz Gun

U. S. Carbine, caliber .30 M1, that's the official name of the new light rifle that is to gradually replace about 80% of the .45 caliber automatic pistols now used in the service.

Army men have naturally been studying fighting conditions in Europe and the light automatic or semi-auto guns such as the Finnish Suomi, Germany's Schmeisser, Neuhausen, Solothurn and Russia's neat little 9 m.m. Bergmann have been very important in this mobile type of war. The combat zone in the present conflict may be fifty or a hundred miles deep, and anyone in it may suddenly be in deadly struggle.

Now the pistol is just not enough gun for such conditions, so over a year ago the War Department worked out specifications for a gun light enough to be carried at all times by artillerymen, motorcylists, ammunition carriers and many others whose personal arms are of secondary consideration. Equipping these men with the infantry rifle would unnecessarily burden them and consequently hamper them in the execution of their duties.

The regular sub-machine gun is shorter

than the service rifle but is just as heavy, and is very ineffective at two or three hundred yards. Another point to consider was the fact that the .30-06 ammunition is quite heavy, so a much lighter cartridge was required.

Specification therefore called for a semi-automatic rifle, chambered for the new light cartridge, together with a five round magazine and light sling which would weigh not more than five pounds, to be provided with magazines up to 50 rounds (later changed to 20) to be as simple and reliable as possible, easily operated by hand if necessary, and as accurate as the service rifle up to 300 yards. It was also required that the rifle be capable of full automatic fire, but after proving ground tests this requirement was eliminated in favor of semi-automatic fire only.

When the initial test board convened on May 1, a bunch of pilot models were submitted by various companies and individual designers. The ordnance men selected the ones that looked like they might operate and started testing.

As this work progressed (tests for accuracy, sustained firing, exposure, etc.), one gun stood out above all the rest. It took more abuse, held up longer under sustained firing, and had fewer broken parts.

This gun which was submitted by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company is something entirely new and different as far as the U. S. Army is concerned. It is 7½ inches shorter and weighs 4½ pounds less than the Army's Garand, which means it weighs a little over 4½ pounds. It is certainly a wicked little job and packs a real wallop! The magazine holds 15 rounds of a new cartridge which has a .30 caliber 110 grain bullet seated in a straight rimless case, and is loaded to about 2,000 feet per second at the muzzle.

Army experts figure adoption of the new weapon will increase offensive fire power a full 33%. Certainly all shots fired from these little rifles will be several times more

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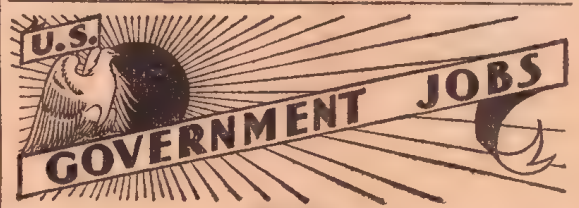

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accurate than those discharged from the .45 pistol. In World War Number One, the average AEF-er couldn't hit the proverbial brick telephone booth at 20 yards with a .45, and was considerably less accurate than that in the heat of battle. The new carbine will change that.

Before we completely throw out the .45 automatic pistol let's take a good look at it. Don't get the idea that it is a lousy pistol for it isn't. It's the best "knocker downer" of all the military pistols.

In 1892, the Army decided to make a change in the Service side-arm, and adopted the .38 caliber revolver. The greater convenience and speed of loading over the old side-arm from which the empty shells had to be individually extracted, plus the double action feature, made the change desirable. (For dope on the Single Action Army caliber .45, see Shooter's Corner in the November 10, 1941, issue of SHORT STORIES.)

The board which recommended the adoption of the .38 caliber said that the stopping power was inferior to that of the .45, but was probably sufficient. Actual experience in war was necessary to learn the truth.

The Spanish-American War and later the Philippine Insurrection proved that the .38 did not pack the shocking punch necessary to knock a man down in his tracks. There were many instances where a whole cylinder full of .38 slugs were pumped into a native only to have him come on and chop hell out of the shooter with a bolo.

So Uncle Sam started shopping around

for a new hand gun. The Colt "New Service .45 Revolver" was adopted and called the "Model of 1909."

Soon thereafter the Automatic Pistol was introduced—and the Ordnance Department started testing these new arms. These tests eliminated all but the Luger, Savage and the Browning.

The Luger was eliminated, then the Savage. So the improved Colt .45 designed especially to meet the requirements of the Army as indicated by the first Service test, resulted in the .45 caliber Automatic Pistol (M1911) being adopted by the Army in 1911 as the United States Service side-arm for both the Army and the Navy.

About 1926, the Colt Company introduced certain changes in the pistol which greatly improved it. (M1911 A1.) It is undoubtedly the finest heavy-caliber automatic (self loading) pistol in the world—but it is admittedly much more difficult to learn to shoot than the revolver. To really shoot this gun you have to constantly train.

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The Mighty Blockhead

THE MIGHTY BLOCKHEAD which begins in this issue is the sixth episode in the saga of Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg. Unheralded they made their debut to the American mystery reading public in *The French Key.* Their success was instantaneous and they have added to their laurels with each successive novel until today they are among the foremost teams of fiction detectives in this country.

The stories appear first in SHORT STORIES, then they come out in book form, retailing for $2.00. Still later they are reprinted in England and in this country in lower priced editions. In thousands of rental libraries throughout the country, they are among the foremost renters. Announcement of a new Johnny Fletcher book generally results in a long list of reservations.

That we are able to present *The Mighty Blockhead* to the readers of SHORT STORIES, in this issue is a relief to the editorial staff, for Frank Gruber is the travelingest author we know. He is always off somewhere. He brought the first instalment of *The Mighty Blockhead* one Monday morning and said he had the second almost completed. Then not a word from him until two weeks later when the second instalment was mailed from St. Louis. The wide open spaces of the west swallowed Gruber then for almost a month, until one day the final two instalments came in—from Hollywood, California. Accompanying them came this letter:

"You will be interested to know that

the crap-shooting sequence in the third instalment was actually lived by your correspondent. He wrote it two days after it happened. Rolling down from Boulder Dam I reached Las Vegas, Nevada, which is some 290 miles from Los Angeles. I decided to drive all the way through, even though it was already six in the evening, but as there is a stretch of desert for one hundred and fifty miles after Las Vegas with almost no filling stations along the way I figured I'd better get a sandwich before starting on this long haul.

". . . Nevada is where all these things are legal. They advertise 'dice, roulette, song and romance' on huge billboards along the roads. You go into a restaurant and you find tables that will accommodate perhaps twenty people . . . and forty to fifty slot machines. (We like Nevada.)

"So I went into this place on the outskirts of Las Vegas, but before I reached the lunch counter I saw this beautiful gambling room, opening just off the lobby. I went in intending to kibitz and wound up by tossing a dollar on the table. I got the dice and held them for a solid half hour, after which I cashed in my chips for $535.00. I was never as hot in my life and would certainly have broken the bank if there hadn't been a $25,000 limit. I made more than twenty passes and by the time I was through a huge crowd had collected and several players won hundreds of dollars each riding with me. Unlike the scene in my story, however, I got away with the money . . . although I admit I drove at around 85 miles an hour for the next hundred miles. I didn't let a car pass me.

"When I return east I am going to detour around Nevada.

"Frank Gruber."

Editor's Note: Since he has already been paid for that sequence we are docking Author Gruber, *prorata.*

Telegram from Frank Gruber: "Oh, yeah? Kick through, or else . . !"

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